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The unashamed story of a girl's journey to the well of forbidden knowledge...

SUMMER CAMP

ANNE HERBERT

"...This is nothing less than a classic case history of modern lesbianism."

— Herbert Greene, M.D.

DOZENS and dozens of fresh-faced kids. Eager young counselors. A friendly nurse and a couple of earnest directors. All are gathered at the swank girls' camp for a summer of fun.

. . . *And then into the cabins and the tents creeps horror.*

The horror of twisted desire, of desperate and sickening cravings.

First the nurse and the directors, then the girl counselors, are victimized by that horror. Finally its fingers reach out brazenly to touch one of the children. . . .

SUMMER CAMP

Anne Herbert

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named in this work
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To Phil—*because it was promised . . .*

ONE

A WHISTLE shrilled, echoing across the crystal-clear lake.

Fifty young girls splashed and squealed their way out of the water.

As the last wet little swimmer ran into the bathhouse, counselor Peggy Matthews climbed to the diving platform and moved gracefully along the board, her tanned limbs gleaming in the July sunlight.

She stood statue-still, arms stretched behind her, chin held high, feet together. The kelly-green suit clung to her pert, young body, molding every curve. Peggy sucked in a deep breath, then took two steps and jackknifed into the water.

Seconds later she emerged, shook her blond ponytail, and with smooth, rhythmic strokes headed for a rowboat some thirty yards away.

Noticing her approach, the girl in the boat oared to meet Peggy, who surface-dived just before she reached the craft and frog-kicked under it.

"Mind if I join you?" she spluttered from the other side.

The girl laughed huskily. "No, come on. I'll give you a lift." She dragged oars while Peggy clambered aboard. "For a campcraft counselor," she said when Peggy was seated, "you do an okay crawl."

"What do you expect from a seasoned camper like me?" Peggy asked, leaning over the side to wring out her soggy ponytail. She straightened. "Hm. That sun feels delicious. Let's not go in yet." She loosened the strap of her suit, lifted her face to the warmth of Sol. "I love the hot sun

beating down on my skin. Feels as though it's going right through me."

"If you'd been sitting here for the last hour," Mike told her, "you'd be glad to get out of this firebox."

Peggy opened her hazel eyes and sat gazing speculatively at the other counselor in the boat. Karen Michaels, more commonly known as Mike, was a big girl—not tall, but husky and broad-shouldered. Her voice was husky too, soft but rather hoarse. She had piercing steel-gray eyes, and auburn hair combed into what the girls called a "D.A." She was wearing a man's short-sleeved sport shirt over her dark swim suit.

Peggy watched the muscular arms push and pull, working the boat into a smooth, rolling motion. The girl was an excellent oarsman, Peggy thought; probably an excellent all-around athlete, by the look of her.

Peggy's eyes traveled down the hefty legs to the broad feet planted on the bottom of the boat. Then her gaze returned to Mike's face. It was the first time Peggy had really studied Mike, and she was surprised at the softness of the features. On close examination the face contrasted rather sharply with the near-masculinity of the girl's body and mannerisms.

Peggy smiled at this girl, this Mike, suddenly embarrassed upon realizing that while she had been scrutinizing, so had Mike. Her eyes had come to rest on the white line above Peggy's green suit where it had begun to slip, exposing the delectable fullness underneath. For a moment Peggy was flustered, but Mike seemed quite at ease.

"Are you really an old pro at camping?" she asked easily. The husky tone made it sound as if she were whispering.

Peggy nodded.

"Camper or counselor?"

"Both—three years at Girl Scout Camp, then I worked at Green Peak for two years. Junior counselor and all that jazz. I've been through the whole bit."

"So why the hell are you here? This place is nowhere, compared to Green Peak."

Peggy hesitated. "None of those co-ed outfits appeal to

me. I wanted to get away from the male race for a while."

"What are you—some kind of nut?"

"On the contrary," Peggy said, lifting her face to the sun again. "It makes sense."

Mike stilled the oars. She frowned. "You have some kind of grudge against men?"

"You might say that," Peggy answered, eyes closed.

Mike did not prod. Silently, but with a thoughtful expression, she resumed rowing. Just before they banked, Mike said, "If you ever want to talk about it—"

Peggy frowned. "About what?"

"Your grudge."

Peggy laughed. "It's no deep, dark secret," she said, scrambling out of the boat. "It's just that . . ."

"Well! Did you girls enjoy your excursion?"

Peggy turned. "Hi, Lil."

Lilian Parker stood facing the two counselors, arms akimbo, sandaled feet planted far apart. Her jet-black hair hung in a long braid down her back. Her eyes looked like burning coals. One delicate brow arched as she said, "It's really a shame our esteemed Director Duncan wasn't able to witness that exhibition."

Mike glared at the dark-haired girl, asked coldly, "Which exhibition?"

Lilian seemed not to hear the question. "But perhaps one of our impressionable youngsters noticed it—and will follow suit. After all," she continued, "if the waterfront director can let friends climb into a rowboat in the middle of the lake, why not a camper? And if one of them drowns in the process, so what? Why, everyone knows camping has its dangers—"

Mike stepped out of the boat. "Knock it off, Lilian."

"Oh, of course. The waterfront director is somebody special here. It's no secret that—"

"I said knock it off."

Ignoring Mike completely, Lilian now flashed a friendly smile at Peggy. "How would you like a coke before craft hour?"

Peggy wondered why Lilian's animosity was confined to

Mike. After all, she, Peggy, had been equally guilty. She smiled brightly, however, and said, "Sounds good. I'll be with you in a second." She turned toward the boat and lifted the anchor rope.

"Don't bother with that," Lilian said, taking Peggy's hand. "I'm sure Mike can manage. She's so muscular, you know."

"But—"

"It's okay," Mike said gruffiy, tugging at the boat to drag it higher on the sand.

Peggy stepped away. "Thanks, Mike."

"Sure. Hey, Peg—" she began, but when Peggy looked at her, Mike hesitated, glanced at Lilian, then said, "Oh, forget it. See you later."

"Sure thing," Peggy agreed, walking off with Lilian.

Trudging uphill from the waterfront, Lilian said, "I think we had better change first, we're both sopping."

Lilian was wearing a two-piece suit the color of her raven hair. The contrast between the ivory of Lilian's skin and the bits of midnight—her hair and eyes and suit—the way in which she carried herself, the tilt of her nose, the proud head—all these served to give her an air of exotic sophistication.

Halfway to the cabin area, Lilian turned to Peggy. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything down there," she said. "I was anxious to talk to you. I realize," she continued after a short pause, "it is none of my concern, Peggy, but I'd like to suggest that you stay clear of Mike."

Peggy was visibly perplexed. "Why?"

"No particular reason," Lilian told her. "I just think it would be best."

"But—"

"It's only a suggestion," Lilian said in a crisp tone.

They had climbed the stone steps leading to the cabins and were now walking among the units spread across the slope of a grassy hill. Just before they neared Lilian's cabin, she said, "You might as well come in. I won't be long."

Peggy followed her, letting the screen door bang shut

behind them. Unlike most counselors, Lilian bunked with staff, not kids; but all the units were the same, consisting of a square interior lined with six beds, a small table at the side of each, an extra blanket at the foot, and a window at the head. There was room for two or three wooden chairs. A dressing alcove held washbowls, water closet, and additional closet space. Showers were located in a different building.

As Peggy lowered herself into one of the chairs, her eyes fell on a colorful splash in the center of Lilian's dark blanket. Peggy rose and walked to the bed.

"What's this?" she asked, stretching in front of her what looked like a multicolored ribbon.

A slow smile crossed Lilian's face. "A bikini," she said matter-of-factly, taking the scanty garment from Peggy and holding it against the top of the suit she was wearing. "It's not very appropriate camp apparel," she admitted.

"Oh, it's daring!" Peggy said. "I'd love to see it on you."

"Would you?" Lilian laughed, snatched the other half of the outfit from the bed, and stepped into the alcove. Thinking the move was an act of modesty, Peggy moved to a window and gazed out.

Seconds later she heard Lilian's step.

"Peggy."

She turned.

Lilian was leaning against the wall, one leg a little in front of the other, both hands behind her back, in a dramatic pose.

Peggy caught her breath at the sight.

Now Lilian walked to the center of the room, her subtly rounded and half-exposed buttocks swaying beneath their scant patch of color. The top of the suit was fastened with not much more than a string across Lilian's back, and there was little more to the front. It seemed to Peggy that only the nipples of Lilian's ample breasts were covered by the bra strip; she wondered why they too were not peeping out.

Peggy's eyes traveled down the satiny skin, past the nipped waist, to the triangular splash of color below

Lilian's navel. Peggy could not deny that the other girl looked exquisite.

Lilian sucked in a breath. The heavy breasts swelled with the action, threatening to burst the confining ribbon.

"Like it?"

Peggy nodded. "It's stunning," was all she could think to say.

That slow smile crossed Lilian's face again, and her coal-like eyes sparked. "Thank you," she murmured, reaching behind her for that vital string.

Abruptly the colors flashed to the floor. Before Peggy could comprehend what had happened, Lilian's hands moved to the small ties at either side of the triangle. Another flash of color fell to the floor, and Lilian stood nude.

Peggy's eyes widened, her mouth dropped, her breath caught in her throat. She could not help staring at the girl in front of her.

Lilian was standing Indian-straight. Her jutting breasts were mounds of rose-tipped perfection. Her stomach was flat and silky, punctuated by a navel like a mischievous dimple. Her legs were slim and long. Her entire body, Peggy thought, was model-perfect, from the top of her glossy hair to the tips of her orange-painted toes.

Lilian bent to retrieve the scanty suit from the floor. Peggy watched the graceful lines of the ivory body as one long arm stretched, one breast moved, one foot went forward.

Lilian straightened. Peggy tore her eyes away and glanced around the barren room, contrasting its homespun, rough-hewn aspect with Lilian's sleek elegance.

"Peggy—"

She whirled just in time to catch the flying mass of color.

"Try it on," Lilian said. "Excepting our height, we're about the same size."

Peggy glanced at a travel clock on one of the bed stands. "No time. If we want that coke we'll have to hurry," she said. "I still have to change. Maybe I'd better run over to my place now."

They met minutes later and walked down the hill, then up another, arriving quickly at the main lodge. This was a large, rustic building surrounded by singing pines, and, at night, whistling winds. It sat in the middle of the campsite atop the highest rise.

The lodge was the center of camp activity. On the ground floor was a large central room with paneled walls and a huge stone fireplace. The ceiling was cluttered with sprawling beams and rafters, the oak floor bare. The furniture included three leather couches, a few identical Adirondack chairs scattered around, a couple of tables, and several lamps. This main room was surrounded on three sides by an exceptionally broad screened porch, part of which was partitioned into game rooms. The remainder served as a dining area. Directly behind the main room was the counselors' lounge.

Inside this smaller room, Lilian pulled two cokes out of the icy depths of the cooler, uncapped them and joined Peggy who was staring through an oak-framed window. Through the tall green pines Peggy could see patches of shimmering blue water below, tinged with the golden sunlight of late afternoon.

When Lilian handed her the drink, Peggy sank into a cane rocking chair. "This is a beautiful place." She sighed.

"Oh, it is," Lilian agreed. "A shame that it's wasted on a lot of squealing, snot-nosed kids."

That stunned Peggy into silence. But she recovered quickly. "If you don't like children, why in the world are you at a camp? Surely you could—"

"It has its advantages," Lilian interrupted. "But tell me—why are you here? I heard that you worked at Green Peak for a while. That's tops. Why the change?"

Peggy rocked back and forth in the groaning old chair. "For the sake of variety, I guess. After counseling a couple of years there, I decided I'd like something different."

"There must have been spots open at the other co-ed camps. I mean, you weren't forced to come here."

Peggy grinned. "Well, it's different, anyway."

"I'm sure you had more of a reason than that," Lilian said.

Peggy tipped the chair closer to Lilian and, cupping a hand to the girl's ear, said in a stage whisper, "It has to do with a deep psychological problem. But please," she cautioned, "don't let anyone know." She lowered her hand.

Lilian laid a palm on Peggy's bare knee. "You are a sweet girl, Peggy. I like you. Just do me a favor—don't try to be cute with me. I don't appreciate such humor."

"I'm sorry," Peggy said in a cool tone. Then, softening, added, "I didn't mean anything by it, Lilian. I simply—"

"Never mind," Lilian said, and smiled to indicate all was forgiven.

Peggy shrugged. "What time do the crafts start?"

Lilian, looking at her own watch, said, "Ten minutes." She was about to say something more when the door clicked open, admitting a petite but rather busty woman in her early thirties. In spite of her starched white nurse's costume, hers was a delicately feminine look—upswept brown hair, smooth skin, smiling red lips, twinkling eyes of a peculiar periwinkle blue.

"Hello, campcrafters," she said, closing the door behind her. She glanced quickly at the empty mail shelf in the corner, then joined Peggy and Lilian at the other end of the room.

Peggy greeted her pleasantly. Lilian said hello as though it were an obligation.

The camp nurse, Beth Williamson, seated herself next to Peggy. "How's the first day going?" she asked. The corners of her mouth seemed curved into a permanent smile.

"Great—so far," Peggy answered.

The nurse studied Peggy for a moment, then said, "You're Peggy Matthews, aren't you?"

Peggy nodded.

"Welcome to our fair camp, Miss Peggy."

"I thank you," Peggy said, with mock formality.

Beth's smile widened. "Seriously, I hope you'll enjoy the summer, Peggy. I watched you at the waterfront. You

seem to have a sparkle and spontaneity much needed here." Beth glanced past Peggy at Lilian, compressed her lips and said no more.

Peggy, too, turned toward Lilian, who immediately forced a smile. "Shall we be on our way, kid?"

Beth glanced at her watch. "Oh, you have plenty of time," she said placidly, then lifted her deep blue eyes to Peggy. "Which cabin are you in charge of?"

"Hillcrest."

"Ah, yes. Ten- and eleven-year-olds, right?"

Peggy nodded.

"Susie Edison is in that cabin, isn't she?" the nurse wanted to know.

Peggy thought a moment. "That little blond one. Sure."

"Susie is a cute girl—full of vim and vigor. But she has problems, you know. She inordinately craves love and affection—although she tries not to let it be known."

"I hope I can handle her."

"Oh, I doubt if you'll have any trouble. She's an ideal camper, otherwise, and will be a good influence on the rest of your girls. By the way, have you ever supervised a cabin group before?"

Peggy nodded. "Last year."

"Good. Then you should have nothing to worry about. However, if something does come up, let me know. I might be able to help you. You can usually find me rattling around the Pillbox."

"Pillbox?"

"That's what we call the infirmary. I guess because I'm so often administering 'happy pills' to homesick campers. You're welcome any time."

"I'll remember that." Peggy glanced at Lilian, who was restlessly dragging on a cigarette.

Other counselors were drifting into the room, most with hair still damp from the swim session, one or two clad in dripping suits, some wrapped in towels or terry robes, most clad in simple denims or shorts. The chattering, laughing girls, ranging from sixteen to nineteen or twenty, were of all shapes and varieties: tall, short, slim, plump; blond, brunette and in between. Generous glimpses of pert,

bobbing breasts, of skin freckled, fair or sun-browned, lent an air of intimacy to the assembly. As the room filled, the odor of fresh young femininity was everywhere.

Peggy was gazing curiously at her fellow counselors when Mike walked in carrying three or four letters and said, "Letter for you, Peg."

Peggy jumped up. "Already? I can't believe it."

Mike handed the letter to her. "Must be nice to be thought of," Mike said, turning to deposit the other letters on the mail shelf. "Hell, I'm lucky if I get one postcard all summer."

Examining the handwriting, Peggy sat down with a scowl. She tore open the envelope and read silently.

"Men!" she exploded, when she had finished. Heads turned toward her. "They're a pain in the neck," Peggy announced. She ripped the letter in two and threw it into a nearby basket. "It's time, isn't it, Lilian?" she asked.

Lilian nodded. Rising gracefully, she glanced at Beth and said, "I'll talk to you later."

Beth said nothing.

Peggy dropped her empty bottle into a case near the cooler and strode to the door. "See you," she said to Beth and Mike.

Smiling as usual, Beth said, "Good luck." But Mike, slouched in a corner chair, was staring after Lilian's departing back.

Peggy and Lilian walked side by side down the worn slate steps leading from the lodge.

Peggy was wearing a red plaid blouse and cut-down Levis that revealed her supple thighs and smooth young legs. She had twisted her damp hair into a corn-yellow knot on the back of her head.

Lilian, too, had combed her hair into a twist. But her outfit bore no resemblance to Peggy's. Lilian had donned orange denim bermudas and a white boat-neck blouse splashed with dots the color of the pants. Her toes and fingers were tipped with the same bright orange. Again,

Peggy could not help feel Lilian's elaborate elegance out of place in these surroundings.

"Am I right in presuming," Lilian asked suddenly, "that your being at a girls' camp has something to do with your idea that the male sex is I quote—a pain in the neck?"

"You might say that."

"Then you're here because of a man?"

"Anyone for Twenty Questions?" Peggy was irritated. "I told you before, it's a deep psychological secret."

"And I told you before, I don't appreciate your humor."

"All right," Peggy said, annoyed, but not wanting to offend the counselor who was her direct superior. "I'm here because I'm sick and tired of men—singular or plural. I'm sick of their bull bodies and their one-track minds. Right now I don't care if I never see another man."

Lilian eyed her with fascination. "Gosh. Why?"

They had reached the bottom of the hill. Peggy faced Lilian. "I'll tell you later," she said. "If I ever feel like talking about it."

Peggy crossed the gravel service drive, making for a clearing shaded by stately pines. Lilian followed close behind. The two girls had picked this spot for the campcraft talks because it was a good setting in which to demonstrate fire-building, at the same time was not too far from the shed where the camping equipment was stored.

Already a cluster of giggling campers was assembled around the thick logs they would use as seats. As the counselors neared the site, one of the girls disengaged herself from the group and ran toward them, her blond tresses flying.

"Hi, Miss Peggy," she called.

"Hi ya, Susie.

The girl took Peggy's hand in hers. "Are we really going to sleep outside all night, Miss Peggy? Without blankets or anything?" She clung to Peggy's hand, wide blue eyes staring at the counselor.

Peggy laughed. "I'll tell you all about it as soon as the rest of the girls get here," she said.

Susie seemed to consider a moment, then consented:

"Okay." After another moment of deep concentration, she asked, "Isn't it awfully scary in the woods at night?"

Peggy smiled once more and ran her finger along the edge of the girl's straight bangs. "Not unless you're afraid of the dark—and good campers aren't afraid of the dark," she told the child.

At the circle of logs, Peggy greeted the other girls, glanced at her watch and said, "We'll wait a couple of more minutes. Some kids seem to be missing." She moved to one side with Lilian while the youngsters—twenty or thirty of them, comprising "Junior" and "Intermediate" groups—stood chattering and giggling among themselves. They were an odd conglomeration, Peggy thought. There were leggy youngsters and squat ones, some pudgy and others thin, a few bold and saucy, many shy. She looked over the heads adorned by tresses ranging from inky black to the sunny gold of Susie's locks, from short bobs to waist-length braids, and she could not help grinning at the neatly starched blouses, creased with lines from being folded in suitcases. She knew it wouldn't be long before the girls would be wearing either wrinkled blouses or camp T-shirts, grubby with wear. From day to day, each face would grow a little darker from the sun, each sturdy, rounded body a little heavier with food and exercise.

When the stragglers finally showed up, Lilian made a harsh remark about getting started on time. Then she stepped to the background, letting Peggy take over the discussion as they had previously planned. Sitting on a stump surrounded on three sides by a couple of dozen wide-eyed, open-mouthed campers, Peggy explained that their first two weeks in campcraft would be climaxed by an overnight hike and a sleep-out. She detailed what they were expected to learn if they hoped to go on the overnight trip, and devoted the rest of the period to general discussion and answering questions.

An hour later, when the bugle sounded, Peggy said, "Chow time. See you tomorrow." The girls scurried from their logs and tore up the hill. "Walk," Peggy yelled, but no one heeded.

"You did a good job," Lilian told her, when they were alone. "You seem to have a way with children."

"I like them, that's all. Come on, before we're late to dinner."

Later, as Peggy scooted the last of her cabin group down to the lodge for the evening program, one of the girls—a tow-headed youngster with big brown eyes—turned back. Sticking her head in the door, she piped, "Miss Peggy, aren't you coming with us?"

"I'll be there, Mary. In a few minutes," Peggy told her.

Satisfied, the girl slammed the door and went scampering down the hill with her cabin mates.

Peggy glanced at her watch. She had forty-five minutes off, not being obliged to report for the lodge activities this night. She took thought a moment, then rummaged through some pockets for a pack of cigarettes to take with her to the counselors' lounge.

At the foot of the hill, Peggy stopped, savoring the fresh pine-scented air. Shouts of laughter echoed from the lodge, then died away, leaving only the whispers of the trees and the lapping of the nearby water against the shore. From where she stood, Peggy could see the moon reflected on the inky ripples. After minutes of gazing at the silver glow, she moved slowly toward the lake as though drawn by magic.

At the waterfront, Peggy was tempted to jump the fence that protected the campers from the dangers of the lake, but unwilling to suffer the consequences if she were discovered—for even counselors had been instructed to keep away from the water's edge unaccompanied—she walked toward the bathhouse. There she lowered herself to the sand, and sat leaning against the building.

Peggy closed her eyes, taking in the sounds of the whistling pines and singing crickets. How pleasant, she thought, was the cool breeze caressing the water, and—

Peggy's eyes flashed open. She was sure she had heard whispers. She strained her ears, trying to detect their source.

"You filthy bitch," came a muffled voice from the bathhouse. "You're disgusting.

There was an indecipherable reply.

"I won't be quiet. And the answer is no. Of all the revolting . . . Why, you should be reported!"

A harsh laugh sounded, followed by a terse remark, in too soft a tone for Peggy to make out.

Then came a thud, and the scrape of feet on the board flooring.

"Don't you dare push me."

More muted words, then:

"I said I won't help you—"

With a gasp, Peggy recognized the voice as Beth's.

"I tell you I'm not going to debauch an innocent girl," the nurse continued. "I refuse to turn her into the kind of twisted person you are."

A barely audible declamation—followed by a hissing sound, or snarl.

"Nothing can change my mind. Don't you realize—you're perverted! That's what society tags you. A pervert." The nurse paused. "I can understand your abnormality, forgive it. But this—what you're asking me to do—" Her voice trembled. "You're shameless. I've never heard of anything so vile, so vulgar, so—"

An interrupting undertone. An ominous pause, and Beth spoke again:

"I'll do everything in my power to stop you, so help me."

A gasp and pause, then:

"You can't do that," Beth protested. "Don't you realize what that would mean? Not only would I lose my job here, but at the hospital back home." A pleading tone now: "My whole career, my lifework—out the window . . ."

Once more the laugh, husky and wicked and unrelenting.

"You bitch," snarled Beth. "You low-down, loathsome bitch. You don't care. You would warp one person's thinking, ruin another's career just to satisfy your leching." The voice rose. "Well, I can't stop you, but I don't have to help you."

The noise of moving feet. More motion, shuffling. Then no sound but the hoarse whisper. And Beth replying:

"What do you have to offer me? Just what could induce me to help corrupt an unsuspecting child?" Then: "No! Don't. Don't touch me. Please—" It was as though Beth were begging. "It's been a long time—too long. I—" Beth gasped. "No. I don't want you!"

Under the bathhouse window, Peggy cringed. She closed her eyes, trying to blot out the horror. But she could not. Beth's words, the pleas and moans tearing from her, brought back torturing memories to Peggy.

They were the very sounds that had come from Peggy herself not too long ago. The scene flashed into her mind. She could see herself—with Ted in that motel room. . .

And suddenly she was struck by the reality of what was happening on the board floor of the bathhouse. But—girls?

Peggy shivered in the warm night. She wanted to run from the sounds, the implications, but she could not move.

Inside, Beth continued to plead. And then: "All right, take me. Do what you will—but leave Peggy alone."

TWO

The world seemed to stop. All sounds and sights and smells were blocked out of Peggy Matthews' spinning senses. Her heart was pounding, her stomach turning. She was sure she was going to be sick. She wanted to scream but she had no voice, wanted to cry but her eyes were dry. No voice, no tears, no feeling; Peggy was numb.

After an eternity, she lifted her eyes to see Beth, a white reflection in the moonlight, rushing like a wraith toward the hill. Minutes later, Peggy pulled herself to her feet and started in the same direction as the nurse. She glanced back once to see if the person of the mysterious voice was behind her, but she saw no one.

Shouts and laughter from the children inside the lodge brought Peggy out of her daze. Slowly she became aware of her surroundings. Climbing the grassy slope of the main hill, she tried to match her mood to the gaiety of the campers but it was impossible. She dragged herself through the lodge doorway, shutting the screen quietly behind her.

Seconds later, she was slouched in a large lounge chair, holding a coke in one hand, a cigarette in the other, uncertain how either she or the cigarette and coke got where they were. Peggy sat in a far corner of the room away from the other counselors, alternately sipping her drink and smoking, and oblivious to the other girls.

"Meditating?"

Peggy looked up, startled. "Oh! I didn't see you," she stammered to Lilian who was standing in front of her.

"I realize that. You haven't seemed to see anyone for the last ten minutes. You're in a world of your own."

Peggy tried to tear her mind from her thoughts and concentrate on what Lilian was saying but she found it difficult. After minutes of standing motionless, Lilian asked, "Would you rather I leave?"

"I'm sorry, Lilian. No, don't leave. I'd like to talk to you." If only she could keep her mind on something else, until she was able to think straight. . . .

But then Lilian asked, "What would you like to talk about?"

And reflexively Peggy blurted: "Lesbians."

Lilian regarded her coldly. "Why are you interested in lesbianism?"

At the realization of what she had said, Peggy became flustered. "I mean—well, are they common around these places?" she stammered.

"How should I know?" Lilian snapped. "I suppose they are. A girls' camp would be as good a breeding place as any, I imagine. Why did you ask?"

"I was just wondering," Peggy explained.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't wonder in front of too many people." After a pause she added, "You're not looking for someone to take your boy friend's place, are you?"

Peggy's head spun toward the other girl. For a long while she stared at her silently. Before she could answer, one of the counselors called from the open door, "It's that time."

Both Peggy and Lilian rose and walked unspeaking to their assignments.

Afterward, lying in bed, Peggy could remember nothing she had done previously. She knew she must have gone through the motions of directing games at the lodge, distributing lemonade. After she had escorted her group to the cabin, seen that they were all properly washed, she had sat on her bed surrounded by five happy girls who cheerfully discussed their first day at camp.

Scant minutes before taps, she had shooed them into their individual beds and when she had rounded the room, covering her charges with lightweight blankets, one of the girls stopped her and said, "I wished for a good counselor, and I got one."

"I was afraid to leave my mother," another confided, "but you're almost as nice as she is."

Now, long after midnight, as she tossed and turned on her cot, trying to reconstruct the day's events, Peggy knew she should be pleased with her first day at camp. The kids liked her. The counselors, on the whole, seemed to like her, too. But the day had been completely marred by the horrifying dialogue in the bathhouse. She fell asleep wondering if perhaps it would mar her whole summer.

Peggy awoke before dawn the next morning, still profoundly disturbed. Waiting for reveille to sound, she lay staring at the log beams of the cabin.

She could not help wonder what lesbian love might be like. But trying to imagine it, she shuddered. A girl attempting the intimacies that only Ted had known? The mere idea made Peggy cringe. She shook off the thought, trying to keep her mind a blank until the camp day began.

At the first blast of the bugle, five girlish heads popped up. Five pairs of fists rubbed at five pairs of sleep-filled eyes, peering at unaccustomed surroundings.

Then all at once the girls came wide awake. In shortie gowns or pajamas, legs flashing, squealing and laughing, they tumbled out of their bunks and scrambled around looking for robes and slippers. After a quick good-morning to Peggy, who was still sitting on the edge of her bed, each young camper slammed out of the cabin and ran down to the wash house in the middle of the cabin area.

Alone, Peggy stretched her arms above her head and let out a yawn. Then she pulled the twisted rubber band from her ponytail and shook out her hair, running her fingers through the soft but snarled tresses.

Slipping into a pair of thongs, she stood up, stretched once more. She grabbed a towel from her rack, then followed the stream of campers down the hill.

Inside the wash house, Peggy worked her way through a throng of noisy youngsters to the large troughlike community sink, where she splashed her face with icy water. Her whole body tingled as the water hit her skin, but after the initial shock she felt fresh and clear-headed. She soaped and rinsed her face, brushed her teeth.

Ignoring the shrill, trilling children, she plowed her way into the open air. As she trudged up the slope, another counselor joined her. The girl was a petite sort—standing barely five feet high in her moccasins—with a short blond bob and twinkling blue eyes.

"Hi. I'm Ruth Harris. I don't think we've been introduced. You're Peggy, right?"

Peggy eyed her companion suspiciously. "Right," she answered.

"You're new here," Ruth observed. "Hey—want to get together later? I'll give you a counselor's tour of the place. There are things you don't get to see when Duncan escorts you around—like where to sneak in if you get back late on your night off." She grinned. "Little things like that may come in handy." Ruth stopped. "Well, see you around, Peggy. Don't forget—as soon as we get a chance," she said, turning toward the senior cabins.

"Sure," Peggy promised. "And thanks."

She walked on toward her own cabin, feet dragging, brow puckered. Vaguely Peggy remembered seeing the

petite blonde running around the day before, but the memory was not too clear. How did Ruth know Peggy? And why, Peggy pondered, was Ruth so interested in being a good samaritan? Could she be the one? Could little Ruth Harris be the sinful creature in the bathhouse who had assaulted Beth, had threatened Peggy?

Immediately, Peggy felt acute shame. How could it be Ruth? The girl was much too cute, too obviously feminine, to be a lesbian. Why, everyone knew, Peggy told herself, that those horrid types were somber and masculine. Even kind of muscular. Peggy made a quick mental rundown of all the girls she had met at camp, searching for the proper image of a lesbian.

They had deep voices and short hair and broad shoulders like—like Mike, Peggy thought. She halted abruptly in front of the cabin.

Like Mike . . .?

A shiver ran through Peggy.

Still scowling, she went inside.

In front of the lodge the counselors were assembling their cabin groups in straight lines to form a spokelike formation around the flagpole.

All the while she had been dressing, Peggy had concentrated on hurrying her girls, forcing all thoughts of Mike out of her mind. But now, over the heads of her crew, Peggy eyed Mike carefully. The redhead was standing a few yards away, between another swimming counselor —her name was Donna Drew—and Lilian. Others nearby included the riding instructor, the assistant director known as Pam, and Miss Duncan herself. Beth was not in sight.

Once more questions filled Peggy's mind. Could Mike really be the contaminated one? Peggy was almost convinced. But, she chided herself, this was no time to make snap decisions.

Carefully, painstakingly, she inspected the others. How awful an influence a twisted counselor could exert on these impressionable youngsters, she was thinking. That

threat was worse even than the one directed at herself. Peggy shuddered.

There was no question in her mind: as soon as she found out who the culprit was, she would report what she knew to Miss Duncan. But not sooner. Without proof, Peggy might be disbelieved. Or the evil one, tipped off, would take steps to avoid identification. Certainly Peggy did not want to get Beth into trouble. The nurse, obviously, was more sinned against than sinning. And Peggy was fully aware that indicting the wrong girl would lead to the most serious consequences for all concerned.

Best to wait. Best to try and trap the lesbian bitch, whoever she was. Peggy would be sure before she spoke to anyone, she decided, as the opening strains of *America, the Beautiful,* to which the flag was raised, broke into her thoughts.

After the flag ceremony, the campers marched line by line through the chill morning air into the dining room. As the girls warmed up—physically and socially—chatter in the large porch expanse grew louder, noisy laughter mingling with the scrape and clatter of dishes.

Peggy forgot herself a little during breakfast, passing around pancakes, dispensing cereal, laughing with her girls. But afterward, when she wandered with the other counselors into the lounge, her misgivings returned.

Slouched in a large corner chair, Peggy studied the girls as they shuffled through the doorway. Was it her, or her—or her? That tall kid over there staring into space? Or one of those chatting gaily near the fireplace? Or that one leafing through a magazine? What about her—the heavy-set girl, puffing like a madman on a cigarette?

How was Peggy to know? Time would tell, she decided, watching a tall, hollow-cheeked brunette approach her, sit down in the chair next to her.

Peggy remembered the girl from the first counselors' meeting. Her name was Dorothy something-or-other. She was the riding instructor and slept in the staff cabin with Mike and Lilian.

"Hi. Cigarette?" asked Dorothy, offering the pack to Peggy.

"Thanks." Peggy leaned closer to the brunette to accept a light.

After lighting her own cigarette, Dorothy snuffed out the flame with a quick shake of the match, sucked deeply, then pulled the cigarette from her lips, holding it between her thumb and forefinger.

She was an odd mixture of feminine charm and blunt, boyish manner, Peggy thought. Dorothy was wearing tight blue jeans tucked into riding boots. Her body was spare and rather lanky, but her breasts were lively under her chambray shirt. Her dark hair fell loosely almost to her shoulders. Her face, lean and bony, had pleasant planes, but her best feature was the pair of large, deep-set eyes the color of black olives.

"You in school?" she asked Peggy.

"Sophomore," Peggy answered. "At West Arts. I'm going to transfer to State next year."

"Yeah? How come?"

"They have a much better curriculum. I'm a psych major, and State is noted for its psychology department."

"Good enough reason."

"I think so."

"Any lovers?"

Peggy flung up her head. "What!"

Dorothy laughed. "Lovers. I always ask that when I talk to folks the first time. Shocks 'em." She grinned. "You don't have to answer. I can read your pretty little face like a book."

A frown wrinkled Peggy's forehead.

"You've got one guy," Dorothy continued. "Maybe you sleep with him, maybe you don't. But he's your one-and-only, right?"

Peggy opened her mouth to speak, but Dorothy went on:

"I know, because that's the way it is with me. I see guys I could fall for, but I have my man and, baby, I know when I have a good thing."

A cynical smile spread across Peggy's face.

"Wasn't I right? About you, I mean."

"Partly." Quickly Peggy explained that she had had a

"steady" but they had broken up just before Peggy had left the campus in June.

Dorothy laid a lean hand on Peggy's bare knee. "Honey, take it from me—don't let him go. No matter what he's done, if you love him, get him back. A good man is like a strawberry roan—hard to find."

The subject did not fascinate Peggy. She attempted to change it. "Will you teach me to ride?"

"Glad to," Dorothy said. "When you have some free time, come over to the stable."

"I haven't much money—"

"Don't be a goose. Counselors get rides at half rate, anyway—and if you treat me right, you won't even have to pay that." Dorothy laughed.

Peggy's eyes roamed the room. With a sharp intake of breath, she noticed that Beth had come in. The nurse was standing near the door, talking to one of the girls. She caught Peggy's glance and smiled a greeting. The smile was friendly, warm. It helped make Peggy feel at home.

In the corner opposite Peggy, Mike was sitting alone, thoughtfully smoking. Noticing the hefty redhead, Dorothy called across the room, "Hey, Mike!"

Mike turned her head.

"I was just telling Peggy here that she shouldn't be too quick to get rid of a good man. Don't you agree?"

Seeming to notice Peggy and Dorothy for the first time, Mike stood up, walked across the room.

Dorothy continued in a lower voice, "Peggy says she just broke up with a guy. I told her she should make sure before she does anything drastic. Right, buddy?"

Mike shrugged her broad shoulders. "It's hard to know. Besides that's Peggy's business." She studied Peggy a moment. "I mean, who are we to say? If she wants to . . ."

Peggy had had about enough of Dorothy. She considered getting up and joining another cluster of girls, but she wanted this opportunity to observe Mike more closely. Leaning against the conference table which stretched the length of the room, facing the two girls, the stocky but by no means unattractive redhead focused her steely eyes first on one then the other of her companions.

Mike was well liked, Peggy knew. She was the only girl to whom virtually all the rest of the counselors had spoken as she had made her way through the narrow lounge. And the day before, Peggy remembered, the campers had clustered around her wherever she had gone. She also seemed to be on good terms with Miss Duncan, the director.

Could a girl so highly regarded be the guilty one? Peggy had suddenly become doubtful. Of course, Mike was the sister of Miss Duncan's assistant. Maybe the popularity was not all genuine. . .

Dorothy nudged Peggy with an elbow. "Mike's a great kid," she said, grinning at the redhead. "All she needs is a hunk of man for herself."

Mike shot a look at Dorothy that would have made a snake recoil, but the dark-haired girl seemed hardly to notice.

"Yep. A man is the best cure for anything that ails a girl." She glanced toward the opening door. "Be right back," she said, springing from her chair.

Peggy stared after the leggy girl in blue jeans then glanced away as Mike lowered herself into the chair Dorothy had left vacant.

"Sometimes that chick shoots off her mouth too much," Mike said. Then she smiled. "After a while you get used to her, though. And I must say, she's wonderful with the horses."

The two girls smoked in silence for a while. Peggy caught Beth's eye again. The nurse flashed a smile across the room, a smile so friendly and genuine that a warm glow spread through Peggy. She smiled in return. Beth seemed to wear no mark, no sear, as a legacy of the homosexual attack on her the night before. Peggy would have expected her to be glum or shamefaced, at the very least. On the contrary, Beth looked fresh and cheerful. This was the girl—the woman—who had gone to bat for Peggy the night before, who had given herself as a sacrifice to shield Peggy from degradation. Peggy shuddered at the remembrance of it. And suddenly, Peggy found herself wondering why she was not confiding in Beth.

After all, it might well be the wisest thing to do. Beth knew who the horrid predator was. Beth, no doubt, knew the score about lesbianism and all that—she was a nurse, wasn't she?—and could advise Peggy accordingly.

But to confess overhearing the conversation in the bathhouse would be to confess hearing what had followed.

How horribly embarrassing that would be to Beth, Peggy told herself. It would reveal Peggy's knowledge of the perverse lust to which Beth had been obliged to yield in the bathhouse. Peggy just could not bring herself to speak. Not yet, anyway.

She would have to work this out by herself.

She was stabbing out her cigarette when Mike spoke again. "You're majoring in psychology, I hear. Is that right?"

Peggy nodded. "I'm still swamped with basic courses," she said, "but I'm gradually getting there. It's fascinating.

"This is a hell of a good place to practice."

"How do you mean?"

"Using psychology on the kids."

"Oh, I don't know that much yet. We don't really get into the stuff until our junior year."

Mike smiled. "If I recall my lessons rightly, half of general psych is common sense."

"That's not true," Peggy objected. "I mean—"

"Look," Mike interrupted, "suppose you wanted one of your gang to fetch something for you. Which would you do—choose a girl and order her to go, or ask for volunteers?"

"Well—" Peggy was thoughtful—"I'd try to get a volunteer. But—"

"Is that psychology or common sense?"

"Common sense, of course."

"But why? Why prefer a voluntary group from which to select?"

"So that the others won't think I'm picking on any particular girl—or favoring her, for that matter."

"So in a way you're trying to control their thinking, right? Is that psych or sense?"

Peggy opened her mouth, then closed it. "I guess you have a point, counselor," she said.

Mike grinned. "Think about it." She glanced at her watch. "I have to get ready for the morning water program," she said, jumping to her feet. "We start the canoe training today." With a wink indicating some of the campers were in for a vigorous hour, Mike turned and walked away.

Other counselors were leaving for the morning assignments. Peggy had to get over to the tennis court. But she sat where she was for a few more moments, pondering the conversation with Mike. How much did the girl know about psychology? To what extent could she use it on people—control their thinking, as she herself had put it? Peggy was uneasy.

She knew enough about the science of psychology to be mystified by its powers. And at the same time a little frightened of them. Conditioning—suggestion—even hypnosis. . .

She was also mystified by this person, Mike. And she was frightened less by Mike's possible powers than by the fact that she, Peggy, could not help liking the redhead. It would be difficult, Peggy knew, to stay on guard with so disarming a girl.

Peggy tamped out her cigarette and left the lounge. Maybe, she told herself as she took the path to the tennis courts, everything would work itself out.

Not that she believed it. For some reason, she now felt more confused than ever.

THREE

DAYS later, Peggy was still confused. She knew she should be doing something to unmask the perverted creature lurking somewhere in the cabins, ready to pounce

on her and perhaps on others. But no clue had developed —no one had made advances, there had been no hint or implication of anything out of the ordinary. Camp activity proceeded normally. Counselors had become accustomed to duties, and campers had become accustomed to counselors.

Maybe she had somehow misconstrued the conversation in the bathhouse. Maybe it had been a couple of girls playing a trick on Peggy. Maybe she had just dreamed the whole thing. These were the doubts assailing Peggy one afternoon during rest period, as she lay pondering the situation once more. Could be she ought to give up suspecting everyone who talked to her, stop her silent accusations.

As she weighed and worried, a bugle echoed through the hills, signaling the end of the rest interval. Peggy managed her usual, "Okay, kids!" But the girls were already off their cots and scrambling into shoes.

"Hi, Miss Mike," a number of voices chorused as a rap sounded at the screen door and the husky counselor stepped inside.

Mike gave the youngsters a wink and a wave, then joined Peggy. "Talk to you a minute?"

"Sure."

Peggy swung her lovely bare legs over the edge of the cot, pulled the tangled rubber band from her snarled ponytail.

When the last camper had departed from the cabin, she said, "What's up?"

"Grocery day, you know, and Duncan had to make an emergency trip to the hospital with Beth. So—"

"God! What happened, Mike?"

Mike shrugged. "Some kid tried to shinny up the tetherball pole and didn't quite make it. They think she broke her arm in two places."

"Oh, great."

"Yeah. Now some damn fool parent is going to come bitching about our lack of supervision or something." Mike sighed. "Anyway, with Duncan gone, Pam is in

charge so she can't leave the grounds. She told me to run into town and take someone with me."

"And I'm elected."

"Right." Mike hesitated. "Look, you don't have to go if—"

"I didn't say I wouldn't," Peggy flared, but immediately wondered why she was the one chosen to accompany Mike.

Was this part of Mike's psychological warfare?

Common sense warned Peggy not to jump to conclusions, either way, about Counselor Karen Michaels, commonly known as Mike.

The fact that Peggy had no good excuse not to go also crossed her mind. If this trip were engineered by Pam then it was like orders from headquarters.

Peggy stood up. "When do we leave?"

"Soon as you're ready."

Peggy snapped a fresh rubber band around her pony-tail. "Let's go."

Both girls were silent as they sped along the highway in the camp station wagon. Mike concentrated on the sunlit concrete. Peggy's attention was focused on Mike.

As the redhead expertly maneuvered the spacious wagon around the curves, Peggy watched intently, noting particularly the hands on the steering wheel—not exactly dainty hands, but soft and surprisingly white. Were those the hands that had quelled Beth's fervent spirit that night in the bathhouse, Peggy wondered, all her old suspicions revived.

Abruptly, aversion overwhelmed her.

The realization that she was alone with Mike midway between camp and town, in territory completely unknown to her yet familiar to the redhead, chilled Peggy to the core. Suppose this trip had been planned, as she had first suspected, simply to get her alone with Mike? What if Mike suddenly pulled into a side road—and parked?

Then, more sensibly, Peggy asked herself—so what if she does? Just what can one girl do to another? Certainly

nothing that could harm either one, she reasoned, consigning some of her fear to the warm summer breeze.

But as she began to relax once more, her eyes grazing the interior of the car, stopping once more on Mike's milky hands, another thought struck. Exactly how would it feel to be touched intimately by another woman? Peggy shivered. How awful. How disgusting it must be!

Being enclosed within the confines of a car with Mike now revolted Peggy. How had she let herself get trapped into this thing? She wished she had stayed at camp. . .

"Are you always so quiet?" Mike asked.

Peggy flushed.

"I was doing a little thinking, Mike."

"Nothing serious, I hope. By that," the redhead hastened to explain, "I mean I hope there's nothing wrong."

"Nothing at all," Peggy assured her. Then, in an attempt at conversation, she asked, "How many summers have you spent up here?"

"Every one of my life, almost." Mike grinned. "I started out as a camper—I was nine years old—and have been here every season since. I began way back before the days of Duncan, even."

"You must hold some kind of record."

Mike grinned. "I guess I do. Pam missed out on a couple of seasons, going to summer school. But there's one other girl—Marsha Hendricks. She's the one that was supposed to work in campcraft with you."

"What happened to her?"

"Mono. The kissing disease, you know?" Mike laughed. "There's only one thing—Marsha hardly ever dates. When we started razzing her about it at school she got so upset we finally had to stop and convince her that we were only kidding. She's the sensitive type."

"Is she very sick?"

Mike shook her head. "She's better now. But the doctor wants her to get a lot of rest before the fall term. I'm glad. We're going to room together this year, and we'd probably get on each other's nerves if we spent most of the summer together, then were stuck with each other in the fall. You know that cliché about familiarity. Besides—"

Mike smiled at Peggy—"now there's no one around to beat that record of mine."

Peggy forced a smile, but her mind was elsewhere. "Why doesn't Marsha date much?" she asked cautiously.

"Well—" Mike was thoughtful. "She's one of those shy, quiet gals. Very reserved. She gets flustered whenever there's a guy in the same room as she is. Hell, she gets flustered when there are more than two girls in the room. But she's a great kid. I hope to get through to her this year. Teach her some things about life and love." Mike winked, but added solemnly, "Maybe, though, I should just leave her alone. She gets involved in her studies—loves her books. She might be some kind of genius who can't be bothered with a lot of romantic crap."

Peggy decided not to pursue the question further. "Why was Lilian chosen to take her place?" she asked.

"You mean in campcraft?" Mike said. "Doesn't seem the sort, does she? Actually, it was all last-minute. Someone else was lined up, but backed out. I don't know what happened exactly, but maybe Lilian volunteered. I'll say this—at least she's had some experience at camping out. That's more than most of the counselors can say, believe it or not. Besides, she's got more time than anyone else. I mean just how much extra work is involved in helping a few kids put on skits?" Mike paused. She cast a sidelong glance at Peggy. "How do you like working with her?"

"Lilian?" Remembering the hostility between the two girls, Peggy answered noncommittally. "She's okay. We haven't been seeing too much of each other. She seems nice enough."

Mike quickly changed the subject. "Have your kids short-sheeted you yet?"

Peggy sighed. "I'm still waiting."

"You're lucky. Practically everyone else has had the treatment." The car slowed as Mike guffawed. "Did you hear about Margie?"

When Peggy shook her head, Mike told the story:

"Well, the other night about nine o'clock Margie decided she'd better leave the lounge. Figured her kids would be raising holy hell. At the cabin, she found all the

girls apparently sound asleep. So Margie stripped down to panties and reached under her pillow. She felt around, then flipped the pillow—no pj's. So she looked in the closet and on her shelf, under the bed, everywhere she might have put them. Finally she threw back the blankets. And there was a note—Would you like to play tetherball? Margie was pretty mad by this time and just threw the damn thing away. But then she got to thinking. So she pulled on all her clothes and went out. Sure enough—her pajamas were tied to the top of the pole. How the hell those little kids got up there, no one knows. Anyway, she had to climb the darned thing to rescue the pj's."

Peggy had dissolved into peals of laughter.

"And that's not all," Mike said. "Margie went back to the cabin, got ready for bed. She started to fluff up her pillow. It was now just a pillowcase full of rocks. By that time she was really furious. She swept her flashlight around the cabin but all the kids were sound asleep—and looking like angels, she told me. Anyway, she went outside to dump the rocks, came back, found her pillow hidden under the bed, fixed it, then crawled into the sack. But she couldn't get her legs down. The kids had short-sheeted her while she'd been out."

When Peggy stopped sputtering, she said, "If my kids try anything like that, I'll—" She paused, scowling. "What did Margie do?"

The question threw Mike into another fit of guffawing. "That's the best part of the whole story. The next night she got one of the other counselors to go with her during the evening program and short-sheet all her kids. But while they were in the cabin, Duncan went on one of her impromptu tours of inspection and caught them red-handed. Honey, I ask you, can you imagine that scene?"

Both girls giggled wildly.

Peggy felt her icy misgivings melting with Mike's easy patter. As the redhead kept on telling stories of other counselors and other years, Peggy's enchantment drowned any reservations she had had about the girl.

In town, when the supplies had been loaded in the sta-

tion wagon, she eagerly accepted Mike's suggestion that they stop for a snack.

Strolling down the street that comprised the entire business section, Peggy noted that Mike, wearing a simple yellow sun dress, did not seem as husky or as tomboyish as she did in her camp clothes. In fact, Peggy decided, the redhead looked quite graceful and attractive. Peggy was sorry she too had not taken the time to change into something more decorative and less revealing. Her red short-shorts exposed so much thigh and flank that stares were bent on her from every direction, and she heard a whistle or two sounding in her wake.

"You ought to hang a curtain over that cute fanny of yours," Mike remarked.

"That's quite an overhang you swish around yourself," Peggy retorted. "You know, a girl can get arrested for disturbing the peace."

A vigorous blush inundated Mike's freckles, but she looked distinctly pleased.

Minutes later the two counselors were sitting across from each other in the local ice cream shop, studying menus that boasted such marvels as beatnik sundaes, astronaut floats, Hollywood delights, western marvels, and one concoction promising five flavors plus candied fruits, topping and—if the customer could finish it in one sitting—a prize afterward: "A dish of your favorite ice cream."

Peggy was about to order an old-fashioned tin roof, but Mike insisted she be more daring. Against her better judgment, she was talked into a two-flavor dish featuring the establishment's own rich sauce, topped with freshly whipped cream, nuts and a cherry.

Probably it was the sauce. Possibly it was the sauce plus the frayed nerves Peggy had initially suffered when the trip had begun. Or maybe it was just the smell of some sacks of onions and baskets of cabbage in the station wagon that did the damage. Peggy was not sure. But a few miles out of town she felt queasy. A mile away from

the campsite she was sick. By the time they pulled into the parking lot, she wished she were dead.

"Oooh," she groaned to Mike. "I'm sure if I move I'll upchuck everything I've had to eat in the last three weeks."

"Try a cigarette," Mike advised in her husky voice.

"I couldn't."

"Can you make it to the Pillbox? Beth would fix you up."

"I—oooh—I'll try."

Mike helped her out of the car, all but carried her to the camp clinic. Beth had not yet returned, so Mike pulled down bedding and told Peggy to flop.

"No, no!" Peggy protested. "I'll be all right. Just give me a shot of rhubarb and soda, or anything like that. She must keep some around here. I'll be fine."

Mike pondered a moment, then said, "You'd better stay here a while, Peggy. I'll go ask Pam what to do. I don't want to take any chances."

Gingerly, Peggy crawled into the bed and lay doubled up, waiting for Mike's return.

She cursed under her breath as her stomach did a flip.

Just then the screen door banged. Peggy opened her eyes. Lilian was standing inside the room.

"I saw Mike drag you in here. Whatever is wrong, I'm sure a cup of tea will help," she said without greeting.

Peggy groaned. "No, Lilian. I don't want anything. I'm afraid even a sip of water would make me—"

"Hush. I'll fix some tea, and you'll drink it." She left the room in which Peggy was lying, walked through the dispensary and on into Beth's private quarters. Peggy tried to shut her ears to the rattling of dishes.

When finally Lilian reappeared in the curtained doorway, balancing cup and saucer, Peggy was still rolled into a ball. She hoisted herself to one elbow. Just as Lilian was handing her the steaming tea, the screen door squeaked open. Mike walked into the room.

She glared at Lilian. "What the hell are you doing here?" she wanted to know.

"I'm taking care of Beth's patient."

"She's not Beth's patient—she's mine!"

There was a creaking of bedsprings as Peggy forgot she was ill and sat up.

"Possessive, aren't we?" Lilian said to Mike.

Peggy was sure she detected a silent but filthy curse on Mike's lips. Then: "Look, while Duncan and Beth are away, Pam is in charge. I'm under her orders to take care of Peggy."

"How convenient!" Lilian sighed. "If only my sister were an assistant camp director, life here would be so—so ideal for me."

"If you're finished making with the wise cracks, will you please get the hell out of here? I want to be alone with Peggy."

"I bet you do." Lilian's lip curled.

"God damn it, Lilian, the girl is sick. She—"

"I only intend to settle her a little—soothe her," Lilian said quietly.

"I told you before, and I'm telling you again—leave Peggy alone. I swear to God, Lilian, if you—"

"Don't threaten me, Mike. Neither you nor that assistant sister of yours have much to say about what I do around this place, and you know it."

"Don't push me, Lilian!"

Lilian calmly eyed the redhead. "What's your concern with our little blond bombshell, anyway? Or are you just looking out for Pam's interests?"

Mike clenched her fists. "You bitch—"

Peggy was staring in wide-eyed astonishment at the two.

Lilian turned to her.

"I'm sorry, Peggy," she said. "It's beastly of us to carry on in front of you. I apologize—for both of us," she added benevolently. "Now drink your tea. I'll stop by later to see if you need anything." She squeezed Peggy's hand, then turned and marched out, poised and cool.

Mike took the tea from Peggy, then uncapped a bottle of syrupy medicine. "This is the stuff," she said, filling a spoon. "Pam told me it's a special potion that will cure you or kill you in a hurry."

Peggy opened her mouth to the oncoming spoon, made a wry face as the medicine trickled down her throat.

Mike smiled. "Think you'll live?" She extended a hand and rumpled Peggy's hair. "You'd better get some sleep, kid."

Then Peggy was alone in the white room.

She could have been in some hospital back home, she thought. There was no sign of camp life in this canvas-walled alcove of the Pillbox. She felt completely removed from the natural surroundings of the camp, from the camp population. Except for its canvas partitions, the room was modernly and sanitarily equipped. So white, Peggy thought. White canvas walls and white curtains on the one big window and white cabinets. There were white sheets on the bed and a white wool blanket. And in the corner a white chair was pushed under a white enamel table.

In the distance young voices echoed across the water. A breeze rustled the pines. As the sounds reached her dimly, they only intensified Peggy's feeling of isolation.

Then the whiteness closed in on her, surrounding her, engulfing her.

The white changed to black. . .

Peggy had been dreaming about Ted. A noise—something from far off, she thought as she stirred restlessly—had awakened her, but immediately she dozed off again, envisioning Ted once more.

Don't be frightened, Peggy, he was whispering. *I want to take care of you.* He rested a hand on her forehead. *How do you feel?*

Peggy did not answer, but in her dreamlike state reached out for the hand and clutched it. The hand was soft and cool, and when he touched his lips to her forehead they, too, were soft and cool against her burning skin.

He was sitting on the bed now, stroking her cheek and hair. For an instant Peggy felt certain she was not dreaming.

She stirred restlessly as the lips touched her forehead once more, then moved to her closed lids, her throat.

Peggy—Peggy, I want you. Over and over he murmured her name, caressing her all the while, stroking her brow, her cheek, her breast.

The bed creaked as he stretched out next to her. Peggy knew she should protest, try to push him away. But his hands were warming her now, and Peggy, in her half-sleep, did not want Ted to stop.

Dreamily, Peggy's fingers sought his hard, muscular body. She drew his nakedness to her, began to fondle him.

Then realization—and wakefulness.

This was not Ted!

Peggy forced open her eyes. All was hidden by the velvet blackness of deep night. She could see nothing, absolutely nothing. She moved her hands again, and touched a silky-smooth breast.

A woman. Yes, a woman was lying in bed with her.

So what? Beth or somebody had come in, had needed a place to sleep, and so had stretched out next to Peggy. Lots of girls slept naked. . .

Peggy's lids dropped shut. That potion she had swallowed was still in effect.

Vaguely, dreamily, she was aware that the body next to her had moved nearer. The hands had started again to touch and caress. God, they were at her breasts.

They were squeezing, stroking. Then Peggy felt moist, tender petals enclose a nipple. It was being kissed. A tongue rasped and teased the delicate surfaces. Peggy's aureoles grew turgid as pangs of sharpest sweetness raced along her nerves.

My God, she thought. She could not be awake. This could not be a girl next to her. Girls could not do such things. My God in heaven, please! I'm in a nightmare. Wake me, God. Man or girl, this is so wrong. . .

Slipping back and forth on the edge of consciousness, Peggy fought to sit up, to escape. When the smooth hands torturing and enticing her reached her thighs, trickling over the skin like feathers, she managed to raise herself on one elbow.

But then the hands did something. Pure pleasure jolted Peggy like an electric shock.

She did not even sigh. Twitching, she fell back into the dim recesses of semiconsciousness.

Yet she was aware that the hands were working faster now, more urgently, doing things Ted had never dared to try. They kindled her every screaming nerve. She felt about to burst into flame. Passion pulsated and raged through her.

Once more Peggy fought to rouse herself from this wild dream—and yet was afraid to lose it. In the end, she clung hungrily to the heated body wooing her, moving against her, carrying itself and Peggy to dizzying heights.

Bad, Peggy told herself, throbbing, as she plunged back into slumber. So bad. So wicked . . .

FOUR

EARLY sunlight burst through the window, bringing Peggy awake. Her eyes rounded the room, stopped at Beth, standing starched and white in the doorway.

"Good morning," the nurse said cheerfully. "How are you feeling?"

"Sleepy," the girl replied, stifling a yawn.

Beth crossed to a white metal cabinet, a smile bright on her face. "When I came in last night you seemed to be sleeping so soundly I didn't want to wake you." She reached into the cabinet. "And judging by Mike's account of your symptoms, I decided sleep was the best medicine, anyway."

Peggy could not control another yawn. "What time is it?"

Beth glanced at her watch. "Almost seven-thirty." She popped a thermometer into Peggy's mouth, laid a cool hand on her forehead. "You did sleep well, didn't you?"

Peggy did not answer. The touch of Beth's soft fingers had caused remembrance to erupt: the caresses, the kisses, the guilty intimacies—all came to mind with vivid lucidity. She tried to shake off the recollection, more than half believing she had dreamed everything. But with the memory her body warmed. Her skin tingled and her breasts throbbed. She knew she had not dreamed.

Suddenly Peggy wanted to get away from this place, from the room and the bed—and especially from Beth, who had just removed the thermometer, checked the temperature, and said, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No. I think I'd better—"

"I think you'd better have a bit of breakfast," the nurse said in a professional tone. "You don't have any more nausea, do you?"

Peggy shook her head.

Beth shook down the thermometer, went through the process of sterilizing it. She turned back to Peggy. "I'll put the water on," she said, but stood motionless, gaze fixed on Peggy—on the mass of blond hair rumpled against the pillow, on the lissome young body curled into a knot under the clinging sheet, hazel eyes peering over its edge.

Beth smiled then.

"You look like an angel when you're sleeping," she said softly. She bent and retrieved the white blanket, which had fallen to the floor. Then she hurried from the room.

Peggy lay there, still groggy, a condition she attributed to the medicine she had taken. From outside, the birdsongs reached her. She heard the milk truck rumble along the road, stop at the main gate, then grind its way up toward the kitchen as reveille echoed through the hills.

When Beth returned a few minutes later, she was carrying a tray laden with toast and tea. Peggy pulled herself to a sitting position, hugged her knees to her chest. She had discovered that she was wearing pajamas. Someone must have slipped them on her while she had slept.

Beth placed the tray on a white stand next to the bed,

then sat in the straight-backed chair, sipping her tea. As they silently breakfasted, Peggy could not keep her eyes from the nurse.

She tried to imagine Beth in something other than the starched white outfit. Slacks, Peggy thought. A bathing suit. She certainly has the figure for either, Peggy decided, considering Beth's trim waist, soft-looking yet compact hips, shapely legs now encased in spotless white stockings.

Peggy's imagination went still further, attempting to picture Beth in a dress—a cocktail thing—and with a man. . .

A man?

It was difficult to visualize the starched and painfully proper nurse with a man. Covertly, Peggy's eyes swept over Beth.

She was sitting up straight, but not stiffly. Her blue eyes were alive and roving the room.

Just then her glance caught Peggy's. The eyes softly glowed as a smile lit up Beth's entire face, curving her generous red lips, dimpling her cheeks, even wrinkling her nose a little, Peggy noticed. What a lovely, appealing woman.

Had wild lust ever irradiated those mellow eyes, Peggy wondered. Had that mouth ever sought another's? Did that cute nose know the scent of a man: the compounded smell of shaving lotion, just-washed hands and freshly laundered shirt?

Peggy could not conceive it. Not Beth, she told herself. Beth's was not a body made for lust and passion, but for love and service.

Oh, Peggy could plainly hear out of the past those noxious noises, those sounds of wanton hunger and its fulfillment, reaching her shocked ears from the darkness of the bathhouse.

Still, Beth had been forced to it. Peggy could not accept Beth as a lusting woman. She shut the idea from her mind.

She saw Beth as nothing but the warm and human nurse, the efficient nurse, that she was. Certainly she could

not have been the woman who had crawled into Peggy's bed during the night.

A thought struck Peggy with such force that she choked on her toast. Why had she been assuming the stranger in the bathhouse that night had been a woman? Why not a man?

"Are you all right?" Beth queried anxiously.

"Oh, sure. A bite went down the wrong pipe, that's all." Peggy set down her cup and sat back in the bed.

What man, she asked herself, could be wandering around loose in a girl's camp? What such man would know her, Peggy, by name? Besides—that had not been a man in bed with her last night.

Or had she dreamed the whole thing?

A chill climbed her spine. No—she knew she had not imagined or dreamed last night's seduction. It had been real.

Just the memory of the hands on her made her body suddenly fill with warmth and desire—and with disgust, with horror.

Whose hands had they been?

Mike's probably, thought Peggy. Surely not Beth's.

Strains of *America, the Beautiful* drifted through the window, abruptly bringing to Peggy's mind a picture of the campers circling the flagpole, watching with sleep-filled eyes as the stars and stripes were raised, stifling yawns to sing, then monotoning: *I pledge allegiance. . .*

Beth rose from her chair. She collected the dishes, then carried the load to the other room. There she rinsed and put them away while Peggy dressed.

Peggy was combing her hair when Beth returned. The nurse leaned lightly against the doorjamb.

"How do you feel now?" she asked.

"Much better, thanks."

"You're welcome to stay longer, if you like."

"No. If you think I'm all right, I'd like to go now. I want to change clothes before craft hour."

Beth crossed the room, sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes still on Peggy. "You're fine. I kept you here only to make sure you would hold down your breakfast.

Rays of sunshine streaked through the window, casting shimmers of light on Peggy's golden hair as she pulled it back into a ponytail. "Beth, that medicine Mike gave me —was there something in it to put me to sleep?"

"That's right. A compound to settle your stomach, too. But I think it was the sleep that did you the most good." The nurse pursed her lips. "You've been losing sleep lately, if I know the signs. Probably that's why something was able to make you feel sick yesterday."

How shrewd of her, Peggy thought. She's a professional nurse, all right.

Beth lit a couple of cigarettes, handed one to Peggy. "Do you like it here? Think you'll be back next season?"

Peggy shrugged. "Too early to tell. It depends."

"Depends on what?"

On whether or not I find out who's haunting me, she thought. *On what comes of it.* Aloud she said, "A lot of things, really."

Beth studied the girl. "Peggy," she said finally, "is something wrong? What's troubling you?"

What's wrong? The query echoed within Peggy. She wanted to shout: *You know what's wrong as well as I do. Better than I do, in fact. You were in on the thing. I only caught snatches. What's wrong? Beth—you tell me.* Instead, she said, "Of course nothing is wrong."

Peggy slipped into her sweater. She looked down at the nurse, and forced a smile. "Maybe it's just the pressure of the first few days," Beth said.

"That's probably it," Peggy agreed, heading for the door. *That and the fact that last night I was seduced by a woman—and liked it.*

The door of the Pillbox slammed shut behind Peggy. She sauntered along the path that led from the small, square building to the lodge.

At a bend in the well-worn trail, she halted. She had a choice of going straight ahead to the lodge or by-passing it and heading for the cabin area. Or she could neglect both paths and cut across the wooded hillside.

She took counsel with herself a moment, then turned off the path. Dry leaves crackled underfoot, pine branches rustled, as Peggy started up the sylvan slope. Small brown animals skittered out of sight: chipmunks, rabbits. The lazy air smelled of balsam and wood smoke.

Overhead a jay called to its mate. A squirrel peeked from the other side of a vine-hung stump. And the sun, on the rise, forced its rays between the tall, full branches, throwing slivers of gold on the dark earth.

Peggy walked along slowly, her mind busy. Reviewing the night, she was filled with apprehension. Was it really possible that the whole episode could have been planned?

Her calculations made it plausible. She had gone into town with Mike while the camp was under Mike's sister's direction. Then, at Mike's urgings, Peggy had indulged in an over-rich delicacy. Finally she had been given a dose of medicine supposedly prescribed by Pam—and which had put Peggy to sleep almost immediately, rendering her helpless.

It was that simple, Peggy thought. Then she reasoned that it was too simple. Somewhere a piece was missing, an integral part of the puzzle.

Even so, she told herself, that was not the worst of her problems. Her big difficulty was. . .

"Hello, there," a deep voice boomed.

Peggy froze.

Sitting on a log less than three yards away was a tall, broad-shouldered youth, his dark eyes brilliantly alive.

Peggy retreated a couple of steps, poised for flight.

"Before you panic," he said, rising, "I'm Kirby Davis. Sorry to startle you. I live over yonder," he explained with a sweeping gesture in some unclear direction. "You must be one of the camp counselors."

Peggy said that she was. The thought crossed her mind that this Kirby Davis was trespassing on camp property, but she decided against saying anything. She wanted only to be on her way.

"Are you heading for the lodge?" the big lad asked.

Peggy shook her head. "The cabins," she replied.

"Oh. I thought I'd join you." He indicated a large wooden crate. "I have to deliver this to the kitchen."

"What is it?"

"Apple butter. Old-fashioned, home-made apple butter," he emphasized.

"Apple butter! From where? We drove in supplies yesterday, and—"

"My aunt makes it," he said. "Aunt Lelia used to do cooking out here at one time," he continued. "She retired a couple years ago, but she still supplies most of the preserves. Home-made jams and jellies, things like that."

"And you're the delivery boy?"

"That's right." A frown crossed his sun-tanned forehead. "Say—what are you doing out here? Isn't everyone at breakfast?

Peggy explained she had just left the clinic.

"Nothing serious, I hope."

Peggy said nothing, wishing she could tell him—anyone—just how serious. Then she suppressed a semihysterical giggle. What a thing to tell a stranger!

Aware of her uncommunicativeness, Kirby lifted the crate to his shoulder and said, "Better be on my way. Hope I see you again some time."

"Me, too," Peggy said meaninglessly, and continued on her way, her thoughts returning to the events of the night.

She felt sick and afraid. Whether or not the seduction had been planned was of little consequence. Whether or not the seducer had been Mike seemed beside the point. The fact was that no matter how it had happened or who had been responsible, Peggy had enjoyed the night.

Then was she one of—of those? Full of horror, she stumbled blindly along among the trees. She tried to quiet her fears by arguing that she had not been fully awake, that perhaps, in fact, she had dreamed the whole episode.

When at last she reached her cabin, she felt calmer, if not more convinced. She decided to forget the night's events until she could consider them with some objectivity. Right now, she told herself, it was high time to concentrate on what she was being paid for—being a counselor.

One more question had developed, though. That fellow

in the woods—what was his name? Kirby? Why had he chosen that peculiar route by which to deliver his heavy load of apple butter? Why hadn't he driven from the highway right up to the kitchen, the way the delivery truckmen did? Even if he had to walk for some reason, why had he chosen to come by forest path rather than by road?

Peggy showered, changed, and hiked down to the lodge.

The first person she spotted in the counselors' lounge was Mike. Memory came flooding back. Pretending not to see the redhead, Peggy quickly averted her eyes. Her heartbeat quickened. Her palms were sweating. Sooner or later, she knew, she would have to face Mike but—Peggy gripped the knob of the still-open door—what would she say? How should she act? Peggy could feel nervous heat suffusing her body, reddening her face. She turned to leave.

"Hey, Peg!"

Her pulse skipped; her breath stopped. She glanced over her shoulder at Mike, who signaled with a toss of her red head. Behind her, in the usual starched white outfit, Beth was sitting on the arm of a chair.

Gingerly Peggy picked her way through the crowded room, sure all eyes were on her, certain that everyone knew, that everyone could see a change in her.

"Feeling better, hey, kid?"

"Oh, I'm full of vinegar this morning."

Mike laughed. "Don't forget the p—"

"Never mind," interrupted Beth. "Hello, Peg."

"Say," remarked Mike, "a friend of yours called. Told me his name was Ted."

Peggy frowned. "When?"

"Yesterday. After I had put you to bed. I told him you were in the infirmary, and he was quite concerned."

"He was?" Peggy thought she caught a flicker of a smile crossing Beth's face.

"He asked a thousand questions," Mike went on, "and wanted to know if I was positive there wasn't anything

he could do. But I finally convinced him you were in the best of hands."

Peggy slid a hard-backed chair from under the conference table, turned it to face Mike and Beth.

He was quite concerned. . .

Mike pulled a pack of cigarettes from her shirt pocket, offered it to Peggy and the nurse. Both declined.

"Yes, sir," Mike said, lighting up. "I think that boy's in love."

Peggy felt her face grow red a second time. She wished she were not so tongue-tied this morning. She sat silently watching the other counselors as one by one they stubbed out after-breakfast cigarettes and left the room.

Yes, sir, I think that boy's in love. Could that be, Peggy asked herself. Was Ted actually in love with her? She very much doubted it. Yet . . .

Mike jabbed Beth with a husky elbow. "Look at that face. Two guesses on what she's thinking about," Mike said.

Then the telephone jangled.

Mike jumped up. "I'll get it," she announced to the room, and pushed toward the clanging pay phone on the wall.

Mike mumbled a few words into the mouthpiece, clapped her hand over it and turned her head. "Hey, speak of the devil," she called to Peggy. "That's your Ted. He's down at Jake's Garage, at the junction. I told him you were better, and now he wants to know if he can come visit you." She held out the receiver to Peggy. "Why don't you talk to him?"

"What will I tell him?" Peggy said under her breath. "I've been trying to avoid him."

"But he came all this way. Tell him you'll see him."

"But—" She glanced at Beth.

"Do you want to see him?" the nurse asked.

Peggy shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose so." Could it be possible, after all? Did Ted truly love her? "Hell," she said, suddenly smiling, "sure I want to see him!"

"Then tell him to drive over."

"What about swim duty? I mean, I didn't do anything all day yesterday, and—"

"Tell him to drive over—I'll give you a medical excuse canceling swim duty." Beth raised an eyebrow. "And any other duties you have today."

Peggy jumped from her seat. If she had not been in such a rush to get to the phone, she might have hugged the nurse.

"Decisions, decisions, decisions," Mike mumbled, handing the receiver to Peggy.

Peggy ran down the gravel drive to the main gate. Her soul was singing. Life was normal once more. Soon she would be with Ted, where she belonged. Did anything else matter? He could take away the doubts and fears, restore the security that seemed to have slipped from her life. He could make her forget last night.

For Ted was a man. With him she could be a woman—a man's woman.

As she neared the road, Peggy glimpsed the familiar Impala convertible gleaming yellow in the sunlight. Her heart galloped. She flew across the dirt road, around the car and into Ted's waiting arms.

"Wow," he said, after a long hard kiss. "If I had known this was the reception I was going to get, I would have come here long ago instead of writing letters that you never answered."

Peggy smiled. "It's so good to see you, Ted. I've really missed you," she lied. "It's just that I've been so busy—"

His gray eyes devoured her. "Are you busy now?"

Peggy answered by lifting her face for another kiss.

At last Ted broke away. "Let's save some until later," he said breathlessly, turning the ignition key. "Where to?"

Peggy shrugged. "Anywhere—as long as we're together."

Ted grinned, and gunned the motor.

As they moved down the road in the open convertible, Peggy rested her head on Ted's shoulder. The warm breeze caressed her bare shoulders, reminding her of the smooth,

gentle touch of last night's lover. She tried to consign the memory to the wind and concentrate on Ted. Why had she been so impatient with him, she asked herself. Why had she tried to cut herself off from him? It was distinctly a pleasure to have his company now, she thought happily. More than that—it was a cure and antidote.

"Want to do anything special?" he asked. "I passed an ice cream parlor back in the village. This is your big chance."

"No!" she said vehemently. "Let's just ride. It's been such a long time . . ."

"It sure has," Ted replied, putting his arm around her.

Peggy snuggled closer and listened as Ted chatted about summer school—about classes, mutual friends, instructors. She told him about camp life, mentioned the overnight hike she was preparing for, gave him portraits of some of her cute campers.

Then they fell silent. The countryside rolled by swiftly as they rode on without destination, turning from one gravel road into another, each like the others yet none the same. For more than an hour they traveled so, quietly and happily, taking in the nearness of each other, enjoying the rugged vistas on both sides of their passage.

Then Ted pulled to the road shoulder, parking on the edge of a clearing carved out of a pine grove. Peggy could hear the murmur of a swift-running brook. On the other side of the road, a granite cliff fell away to farmlands far below, affording a broad, bucolic view of breathtaking sweep.

"How about a walk?" Ted asked.

They slid out of the car and started hand in hand across the grassy clearing.

"Let's look for the brook, Ted."

"Sure."

But when they were among the pines, Ted suddenly pulled her to him. "So how's my girl?"

Peggy swiveled her hazel eyes toward him. She could not answer, for already Ted's lips were on hers.

"I'm fine," she said weakly, when they had parted.

"You're great," Ted contradicted. He looked powerful

and capable, standing there in his brown slacks, his red sport shirt open at the throat and revealing tufts of dark hair.

He was breathing heavily, Peggy noticed. So she was not surprised when abruptly he grabbed her, holding her so close that she could feel the heat of his body through her white T-shirt.

"As you say, it's been so long," he whispered into her ear. "So damned long, Peg."

He kissed her, forcing her mouth open, and Peggy could feel his warmth flowing into her. His hand slipped under the back of the flimsy shirt, crawled up to the bra snaps. His palm caressed the skin there, moved around and then descended to her stomach. The fingers roamed until the breasts ached for his touch. When she could stand it no longer, she blurted, "Please, Ted . . ."

He lowered her to the ankle-high carpeting of pine needles and yielding grass. He unloosed the bra, freeing her bosom under the T-shirt. Then he fondled first one breast and then the other.

"Oh, Peg," he breathed. "My pretty Peg—"

They clung to each other on their soft green bed, fondling and feeling. Then he pulled her out of the T-shirt, removed the loosened bra. Her fullnesses were exposed, delicate mounds of creamy flesh, each with its rosebud tip.

With a cry that was like a sob, he plunged his curly head between the sweet, pink buds. Then he was all over her at once. His shaking hands roved her long legs, her smooth shoulders, buried themselves in her hair. His chest received the thrust of her hungering breasts. His hot lips worked on her mouth. Peggy thought she would explode.

"Isn't this better than fighting?" he queried hoarsely. "Every day, since we quarreled, I've thought of you like this, honey. I was going crazy—I needed you so much . . ."

Peggy felt herself spread-eagled, then; pinned suddenly by massive weight, she could hardly draw a breath. A pine cone was biting into her spine. Hard hands were con-

vulsively clutching her hips, digging, hurting her. Ted was muttering like a madman, grimacing, looking as if he were about to foam at the mouth.

Something snapped inside of Peggy.

The warmth was gone. Desire melted and chilled. She lay still as Ted greedily sucked kisses from her. She felt nothing, certainly not passion. Yet Ted seemed not to notice. He went right on while her mind drifted to the previous night.

She remembered those tender hands, so unlike Ted's rough ones. She remembered the delicately cool lips, the creamy flesh against her. She would have remembered more, but a knife pierced her, plunged to the core of her. "Ted!" she shrilled, as all sensation was blotted out save pain—searing, engulfing pain.

And then it was over. Ted sagged upon her, exhausted, his head resting on her still aching breasts. After his breath had slowed to normal pace, Peggy stirred under him.

"Are you finished?" she asked. When he made no answer, she disentangled herself and sat up.

She dressed quickly and combed her hair. Then she spoke again.

"Take me back to the camp."

FIVE

TED left her at the gate.

"Why are you angry, Peg?"

She shook her head. "I'm not." Her voice was barely audible.

Peggy's change in mood had thoroughly flustered Ted. "If I did anything wrong, I'm sorry, but—" He pulled her to him. "God, Peggy, it's just that—"

She broke away. "I said I wasn't angry. But I have

things to do. After all, I'm just hired help around here." She stepped to the road. "See you, Ted. Thanks for the ride."

He slid out of the car, reached for her arm, spun her around to face him.

"What the hell do you mean, thanks for the ride?"

"What the hell do you think I mean?" She pulled away from him and ran through the gate into the security of the camp.

"Peggy!"

She started up the dirt driveway. Her shoulders drooped, her head hung; her eyes, though, were dry. Halfway up the hill, she heard Ted start the car and speed away.

Mike's face registered acute shock, some minutes later, when Peggy walked into the tennis shack dressed for action. The girls had already divided up for doubles and were taking their places on the courts.

Mike sidled over to Peggy, who was choosing a racket.

"What are you doing back so soon? Beth told you we'd take care of everything."

"I know," Peggy answered tonelessly. "Ted had studying to do."

"My God! That's no excuse. What's so important that he has to study up on?"

"His manners," responded Peggy, grim-lipped.

Mike gaped.

"They need a player on Court Three," she said, turning away.

Walking listlessly to the court Mike had indicated, Peggy noticed the little blonde, Ruth Harris, giving stroke instruction to some intermediates on Court One. Ruth waved cheerfully. Peggy tried to concentrate on knocking the ball around with three camp seniors, all in their teens. They were fresh and fetching, all bare legs, gawky arms and flying tresses as they skedaddled over the clay in frantic pursuit of the ball. One girl in particular was as cute as a kitten in a brief white outfit fit for a tournament at Wimbledon but wholly out of place in a camp. The other girls laughed and teased her as she proudly romped

around, her round rump bobbing saucily under the thigh-high white skirt.

Peggy was in no mood to appreciate the charms of her young charges. She gave them some pointers on service, then they began a doubles set. The ball flew back and forth. At first Peggy and her partner were ahead, then their opponents took the lead. It did not matter to Peggy. The ball came, Peggy hit. The ball came, Peggy missed.

Then, as she watched, what had been just a small felt ball on the other side of the net figuratively grew and grew, sprouting hair and eyes until it looked like Ted's face coming down at her, closer and closer.

Peggy gripped the racket. Her arm went back, swung forward, as she smashed at the ball with all her might—and missed. The pain that shot through her shoulder made her gasp.

The game stopped momentarily, the girls inquiring if she were all right. Flexing the shoulder, she assured them that she was.

She glanced at her watch. "Let's go, Bernice," she called to her partner. "We don't have much time to win this set."

She tried to ignore the stiffening muscle as she worked at evening the score. By the time Mike blew the whistle signaling the end of the session, the set stood at five-all.

After the girls had left the courts, Peggy and Mike locked up the equipment. They started toward the cabin area together. As they walked, Peggy moved her shoulder gingerly, at the same time massaging it with the fingers of her opposite hand.

"My God!" Mike said. "Are you accident-prone or something? First it was your stomach. Now it's your shoulder."

"I pulled a muscle, I guess."

"A Charlie-horse. Everybody gets 'em early in the season, before they get in shape."

Peggy shook her head. "I thought Charlie only got you in the legs."

"Okay, so it's a sprain. In the water, it's a cramp. Same thing. Come up to the cabin," Mike invited. "I'm great

at rubbing out the kinks. I want to talk to you anyway," she added.

Apprehension clamped Peggy. During the ride back to camp with Ted, she had not been able to help comparing his style of love-making with that of her unidentified nocturnal visitor. Even in her doped state, Peggy had enjoyed the mysterious lover much more, infinitely more. Did it mean, she had wondered, that there was something wrong with her? She had pictured Mike then, forgetting Ted and the car and the rolling countryside and golden fields. Instead she had envisioned Mike's soft, white hands, the penetrating gray eyes, the broad shoulders and smiling lips. She had heard Mike's husky voice. At that moment, Peggy had been pretty much convinced that she had been seduced by Mike and no other. What would it be like to exchange kisses and caresses with the red-haired girl when she, Peggy, was not sleeping but wide awake?

Peggy had shuddered at that last thought. And yet there remained the fact that acute pleasure had been hers the previous night.

By the time Ted had left her at the gate, Peggy had made up her mind. If she had lesbian leanings, horrible as they were, better that she should know it. She would find out for herself if perhaps she were abnormal, if she craved another woman's love rather than a man's.

But now that she was going to be alone with Mike, she was full of fears. Could she go through with it?

And then a peculiar metamorphosis took place as the two youthful counselors trudged up the hill. By some alchemy possibly born of the unsatisfied, unfulfilled state in which Ted had left her, Peggy's apprehensive feelings changed to those of excitement, of a kind of delicate, tentative lust.

She laughed at herself. Ever since the night she had overheard the conversation in the bathhouse, she had been avoiding Mike. She had feared to get too close to the girl this morning. Yet now suddenly Peggy was full of eagerness. She wanted to get it over with. She wanted to know.

The two girls ambled on, Peggy deep in her own

thoughts. Suddenly she lifted her head. They had reached the staff cabin.

Inside, Peggy stretched out on someone's bed while Mike hurriedly changed into a shapeless black tanksuit. She flung her discarded clothes in a heap on her bed.

"Got to get to the waterfront in a few minutes," she said, pulling and poking the suit into position on her solid curves. "You know, you never did explain that grudge you have against men—the one that made you sign up here rather than at a co-ed camp. Has it got something to do with what's-his-face?"

"Yes. It has everything to do with Ted." Peggy rolled over on her stomach, rested her head on crossed arms. "I thought I was in love," she said, unexpectedly more than willing to confide in Mike. "I was convinced he felt the same. I had visions of orange blossoms and wedding bells and living happily ever after. We did everything together —studied, went to dances and football games, took in movies and lectures. He even drove me home to meet his folks, one weekend. They liked me, I think."

Mike sat down on the edge of the cot, a bottle of suntan lotion in her hand. She applied the creamy liquid to her dangerously pink arms and legs. Peggy noted how fair Mike was, how freckled. A pleasant, disarming effect, thought Peggy. Then her thoughts flashed back to Ted.

"Yep," she sighed. "Ted and I. Life was a bed of roses—until I gave him what he wanted. After that, life was a bed. Cars, motels, inside or outside—it didn't matter. Any old place would do. And I got tired of it." She paused. "That's all, Mike. I got tired of it. The end."

Mike's hands, smooth with lotion, began to massage Peggy's shoulders. "And today—"

"I'd rather not talk about it," Peggy said.

"Did you think he would be any different? Is that it?"

"I had hoped he would."

For a while Mike stroked and rubbed without speaking. Then, "You mean because of one oversexed male you're calling it quits?" Her hands moved lower on Peggy's back.

Ignoring Mike's question, Peggy murmured, "That feels good. Oh, good—"

Mike stroked, pinched, her strong fingers industrious and clever. "You never can tell," she said. "He sounded like such a hell of a nice guy over the phone. Really interested in you, too. Maybe—"

"Please—I don't want to talk about him, Mike."

"Sure, Peg. How's the shoulder feel now?"

Peggy shrugged a couple times, moved her arm. "Better. Really better. A little stiff, but I'll live."

"Hey!" Mike rose, crossed the room. She took a bottle of liniment from a shelf. "Loosen your shirt," she said to Peggy. "I forgot about this stuff. It should fix you up in no time."

Peggy pulled off the shirt. She undid her bra.

Sitting down on the bed once more, Mike let the liniment trickle to Peggy's skin. The concoction hit cold on Peggy's flesh, but as Mike began to rub it in, Peggy felt heat work through to the aching muscle.

After a while, Mike spoke—quietly, voice huskier than ever: "Peg, about yesterday—"

"Yesterday?"

"In the Pillbox," Mike said.

Memories flooded Peggy. "Yes?"

"I just want to apologize—"

"You don't have to apologize—unless you're sorry for what happened," Peggy told her, afraid of what might be said, afraid once more of her own feelings and yearnings.

Mike massaged gently, tenderly. "I want you to understand how I feel. Why I acted the way I did."

Peggy thought of her romance with Ted, the days and the nights, the beginning and end. She wondered briefly if there had ever been a man in Mike's life. She contrasted the previous night's silky love-making with Ted's tough, hurtful sex. And she said, "I understand, Mike."—Although not sure if she did, only hoping.

After a long silence, Mike spoke again: "There are a few things you should know."

"I don't want the details of anybody's life history."

The words sounded more abrupt than Peggy had intended, interrupting the smooth rhythm of Mike's fingers.

"I wasn't going to give you a life history," Mike answered tartly, her fingers stopping altogether now, but still resting on Peggy's back. "I just think you should understand the situation." She reached for the liniment.

"I understand all I want to."

Once more cold drops on bare skin. Peggy winced.

"Peggy—"

"Please, Mike."

"All right, Peggy. But—" She sighed. "Forget it. Roll over, will you? I want to work on the front for a while."

Peggy squirmed. She rose to one elbow, flipped herself to her back. The straps of her bra hung loose. She flung it off. Her lithe, luxuriant breasts poked their saucy tips at Mike.

"Nice," Mike commented huskily. "Do you always wear a bra? Most of the girls don't, here in camp."

"I don't like the feeling of them bouncing around. They're so big."

"The bigger the better, I always say." Mike's hands spread liniment on the smooth skin over Peggy's bosom. The palms rubbed and kneaded. Peggy waited breathlessly for the hands to go lower. Deliberately she shifted a little, bringing a breast into contact with Mike's fingers, trying to tempt her, encourage her.

It wasn't so bad to be close to a woman, Peggy thought. To have her hands on you, moving, touching, roaming. In fact—

The screen door banged.

Mike jumped to her feet.

Lilian stood just inside the door, one eyebrow arched. "I hope I'm not intruding."

Peggy swung to a sitting position on the edge of the cot, grabbed for her brassiere and shirt.

Lilian was staring at Mike, whose pale flesh seemed to be bursting out of the scanty tanksuit. "Excuse me, Madam Waterfront Director, isn't it time you were directing?"

Mike glared at the girl with the black hair. "I was just

leaving," she said, and turned toward Peggy. "You coming?"

Before Peggy could open her mouth, Lilian said, "She can find her own way to the lake." As Mike crossed the room, Lilian added, "I won't keep her long."

Mike cast Lilian a killing look as she lumbered out the door, slamming it behind her.

"She needn't have left in such a huff," Lilian commented. For a moment she stood poised like a bright bird in her costume of blue blouse and tight orange shorts. Then she walked over to Peggy, placed a palm on her forehead. "How are you feeling?" she asked, with a mildness Peggy had not expected.

"Mentally or physically?" Peggy asked.

"Sassy, huh?" Lilian patted her cheek, and walked away. "I take it the stomach trouble is over, then."

"Yeah, the stomach is fine. But my shoulder—ouch! Smell the liniment? Mike was giving me a rubdown."

"I bet," Lilian said. She slipped out of her blouse. "Aren't you going down to the waterfront?" she asked. "You're supposed to be on duty, you know."

Peggy nodded. "I suppose I should go change."

Lilian pulled something colorful from a drawer, flung it at Peggy. "Try this on," she said.

"I can't wear that," Peggy protested. "It's a bikini."

"I think you can," Lillian said, stepping out of the shorts. She hung her outfit in the closet, then walked across the room in filmy panties, her bosom bare. Peggy was still sitting on the bed.

"You're not dressing," Lilian said, leaning over to retrieve the bikini. "Want some help?" She reached for Peggy's shirt.

Peggy pulled away. "I can do it," she said, slipping out of the thing.

Lilian's eyes were fixed on Peggy's full breasts, squeezed into a snowy white bra quite inadequate to hide the creamy mounds. Abruptly she turned away. "Put it on," she said, moving to her own cot on which a one-piece black suit was lying.

By the time Lilian had pulled on her suit, Peggy had

stuffed her hips into the triangular patch and was struggling with the ribbon around her breasts.

Lilian walked over to her. She took the ties of the bikini in one hand, lowered Peggy's hand with the other, then trailed her fingers up Peggy's arm to rest momentarily on her shoulder. She ran a palm across Peggy's bare skin.

"You have a beautiful back—soft and cool, like satin."

She took more time than Peggy thought was necessary to tie the band. Then she ran her finger under it, adjusting it.

"Turn around," Lillian said, and stepped back. The dark eyes traveled from Peggy's generous breasts to her exposed belly, across the polka-dotted triangle, down the firm thighs—and back to the breasts.

Lilian smiled. "I guess you are a little bigger than I," she said, moving toward Peggy. She reached out to straighten the ribbon and thus cover a nipple that insisted on peeking over the edge of the band.

The touch of Lilian's agile hand against her breast made Peggy's skin tingle. She made an attempt to push the hand away, but in the process both girls moved so that the hand dropped straight down, one long nail leaving a mark on Peggy's skin, then catching in the top of the bikini panty.

Peggy's eyes flashed to Lilian's face. Neither girl moved. They stood fractions of an inch away from each other—Peggy's heaving breasts all but touching Lilian's semi-exposed bosom. Lilian's left hand, warm now, rested on Peggy's forearm, while the finger of the other still clung to the suit. Dark eyes held hazel. Hazel eyes did not waver.

It was Lilian who moved first. She withdrew her hand, removed her finger, looked away.

"I'm sorry, Peggy," she said, eyeing the red scratch on Peggy's stomach. She ran a fingertip along the mark. "Does it hurt?"

Peggy laughed uncomfortably. "Forget it. I'm accident-prone. I should have told you."

"You're elegant in that suit, Peggy! Look in the mirror."

Lilian started out of the cabin.

"I'll be right back—I'm going to the washroom—"

Peggy padded over to the full-length mirror on the closet door. She was startled by the girl gazing back at her. The bikini certainly did things for her nineteen-year-old body.

Peggy Matthews studied herself from head to toe. She took in the blond hair that fell to her shoulders, thick and silky, dipping in a wave on her forehead—the unusual clear-hazel eyes smoldering under starry lashes—the pert nose with its touch of little-girl innocence—the full cherry lips, moist, slightly parted, yielding a glimpse of even white teeth. She inspected the ivory column that was her neck, her tapered shoulders still glistening with liniment, her breasts—full and firm, proud in their youthfulness.

Peggy wanted to tear away the knotted band hiding the bold pink nipples. She wanted to see them staring back at her, taut and ready for love. But she resisted the impulse and lowered her eyes to the bareness below the ribbon—to the skin so white because it was always hidden from the sun, skin petal-soft and baby-smooth—to the dark hollow that was her navel, small and unobtrusive, yet in its own way attractive, she thought—to the flat stomach unblemished except for the red mark left by Lilian's nail.

Her eyes rested then on the bikini triangle, bright and alluring, hiding practically nothing. She measured her hips, full and round, her firm thighs, golden with the sunlight they had captured. The legs, stemming long and shapely from the bikini's edge to the painted toenails, she knew were good legs. Made for bathing suits and short skirts—and for loving, by the looks of them.

Loving. . .

Could so warm and womanly an exterior hide a rotten core?

Peggy shifted her glance and realized that she had not been the only one studying her near-naked body.

Lilian had returned and was standing in the doorway. She averted her eyes and walked in.

"Listen," Peggy said. "This thing is too small. And too daring. I think I'd better get it off." She struggled with the back ties once more.

"Let me help," Lillian said. "I think there's a knot."

Peggy turned and fumbled with the lower ties, while Lilian worked on the ribbon. By the time Lilian had loosened the knot, Peggy was holding the triangular patch in her hand.

Lilian's arm went around Peggy to catch the band as it slid from the quivering breasts.

Peggy whirled as the door creaked open. She was standing a breath away from Lilian—but facing so that Mike was gazing directly at her naked bosom.

There was not a whisper of sound in the room. Even the noises outside seemed to stop as the three girls confronted each other: Peggy covered only by a crumpled patch she held in front of her—Lilian, mouth open, startled out of her usual poise—and Mike, silent, sturdy body motionless in the flimsy black tanksuit.

Then, as though a lever had been pulled releasing them, all three moved at once. Peggy grabbed her shirt from the bed. Lilian stooped to pick up the fallen bikini. Mike mumbled, "Forgot my towel." She grabbed the fluffy white terrycloth from a rack and slammed out of the cabin.

SIX

STANDING in the glaring afternoon sunlight a few minutes later, her eyes focused on the shimmering blue water, Peggy wished she had begged off guard duty during free swim. It was difficult to concentrate on the swimmers

when her thoughts kept flashing back to those last few minutes—seconds, actually—in the cabin.

What would Mike think, Peggy wondered. What could she think, being the kind of person she was?

And Lilian. Peggy blushed, thinking of how self-conscious she had been about baring her body, about being touched. Surely, after Lilian had walked in on that massaging bit, Peggy's jumpy reactions must have put suspicions into the shrewd Lilian's head. After all, what was out of the ordinary in visible nudity, in being helped to dress or undress, at a camp teeming with girls of all ages?

Peggy bit her lip. It served her right. Those feelings of lust and curiosity of hers had been wholly evil, noxiously twisted in a way that deserved scorn and punishment.

Yet she was quite convinced by now that something could be wrong with her. That bliss during the night, real or dreamed. That pleasure in the knowing touch of Mike's hands. That hypersensitivity about her body exposed to Lilian. These made it imperative, it seemed to Peggy, that somehow she learn the truth about herself.

Peggy forced herself to concentrate on the youngsters in the roped-off "crib"—the section reserved for weak swimmers. Their shrill voices, as they frolicked and splashed, made them sound like a flock of birds.

The brilliant sun beat down on Peggy's bare back and hair, burning her skin and making her scalp hot and sticky. Her eyes skimmed the crystal water, traveling past the swimmers, out to the dark center where you could dive to icy depths that the sun could not reach. Soon she would go in for a dip and get rid of that liniment smell. Her shoulder did feel much better.

Peggy snapped to attention. Some of the girls had started a game of water tag. This was allowed, but always threatened trouble: a collision, an upset, an unexpected gulp of lake water going down the wrong pipe and leaving a girl gasping. Peggy followed the proceedings with an alert eye as the kids squealed and splashed and dodged in all directions. Shrill cries and laughter floated upward.

Peggy smiled involuntarily at sight of the merriment, but her attention was soon drawn to another bunch of

girls, somewhat older, swimming in from the diving raft. One slick blond head was falling behind, and the strokes were labored. Peggy squinted against the sun. She recognized the head as that of Susie Edison. Suddenly the child threw up a hand, seemed to slip backward in the water. In a moment she was submerged. She surfaced, lifted her other hand wildly, disappeared again.

Peggy blew three sharp blasts on her whistle.

In a bound, Peggy had leaped from the dock and was wading through the crib to deep water. At the sound of the whistle, as trained, the campers stopped all activity, pulled in to shore or stopped where they were, treading water.

On station far on the other side of the raft, Mike heard the signal and came piling in with the boat, oars flying furiously. Dorothy, the tall riding instructress, was on raft duty. She took a long, racing dive, crawled hard toward the sinking child.

But it was Peggy who got there first. She surface-dived, caught Susie about four feet down, easily evaded the hold the child tried to clamp on her. Working from behind, Peggy twisted Susie into a cross-arm carry, kicked to the surface and began pulling her to safety.

At the dock, Mike took Susie into her arms, ran with her to the bathhouse. Dorothy and Peggy were close behind, along with dozens of frightened campers and counselors.

"Ella, see if you can find Miss Beth. She might be in the Pillbox," Peggy called to one of them. "You go too, Joyce. Look in the lounge. Tell Miss Beth to come right away. The rest of you stand back. Keep away from the bathhouse—"

But the Intermediate group was already out of the water and thronging the interior of the bathhouse; they were scheduled for extra softball practice. They were standing around in every stage of dress and undress, drying themselves with towels, combing hair, sorting out shoes, giggling and squabbling with each other.

"Out, everybody!" yelled Dorothy. But the girls only backed up a bit as they caught sight of Mike carrying

Susie. Peggy had found an air mattress. Susie was lowered to it. Moaning and sputtering, she lay with her legs doubled up, her hands clutching at her stomach.

Dorothy herded the Intermediates through the broad doorway, took up guard in front of it.

By this time Susie was sitting up, still sputtering and gasping, but strong enough to rub her eyes with her fists. "My belly," she moaned. "It hurts."

"Stomach cramp," muttered Mike.

At that moment Beth walked in.

She was wearing a short, nubby beach coat over a one-piece orange swimsuit.

"What happened?" she wanted to know at once. Before Peggy had finished explaining, Beth had pulled off the coat and was wrapping it around the girl.

"Let's get her dried off and warmed up before anything else," Beth said. On her knees, she spoke reassuring to Susie. "As soon as you get out of this wet suit, you'll feel better." Beth fumbled under the robe, her fingers working expertly with fastenings. "Lift your foot," she said. Then she pulled the cold, wet garment from Susie's cramped and shivering body.

"Listen," Mike said gruffly. "I've got to get back to the water. All the kids are waiting to resume the swim."

"Go ahead," Beth said. "Susie will be all right. Peggy will help me."

"Come on, Dorothy," Mike said at the doorway. She and the riding counselor, shooing away curious children at the doorway, walked off along the dock. Dorothy was not usually assigned to water duty, Peggy knew. Probably the tall girl was substituting for some counselor whose "day off" it was.

Peggy appreciatively watched Beth work. She had grabbed a towel from a nearby bench and was briskly rubbing the nude quivering body, all the while talking softly and soothingly. Susie relaxed a bit.

When she was completely dried, Beth helped her up and steered her toward the bench. But once more Susie's arms clutched her aching belly. Beth attempted to force Susie back on the wooden bench but on second thought

Beth herself sat down, lifted the chubby ten-year-old to her lap.

Beth held Susie close, urging the wet head to her shoulder, for a moment touching a cheek to the damp blond hair. She stroked tenderly, rocked back and forth, crooned and patted. She touched her lips to Susie's neck.

The girl's whimpering stopped.

"That's my girl. Put your arm around my neck," Beth said then, taking the arm from where Susie was still clutching herself. "You hold on to me, and I'll make your tummy feel better," the nurse promised.

The girl forced herself to keep her arm from her body. She clung desperately to Beth. Beth's hand went under the warm robe, parting it slightly. For one second she stroked the virgin softness of the girl's cramped belly. Then she began to rub. Her fingers massaged and kneaded, the heel of her hand pushed into the tightened muscle, forcing some of the pain away.

Susie lay quietly in Beth's arms as the nurse worked, her head still resting on Beth's shoulder. Her bare legs dangled from the loosened robe, her feet not quite touching the floor.

"Does that feel better?" Beth asked.

Susie nodded. One hand wiped away drying tears from her eyes. She snuggled closer to Beth, who kissed the creased brow.

"Can't I do anything?" Peggy asked.

"I don't think so, Peggy. I would guess the cramp is about gone." She gave Susie a hug. "Think you can walk now, dear?" she asked.

Susie sat up straighter. She squirmed from Beth's lap and tried to stand.

"Can you walk up the hill?"

"I g-guess so, Miss Beth."

"We'll be all right," Beth told Peggy. "You can get back to duty." Her voice full of somewhat overdone cheer, she said, "Susie's going to have a little medicine, lie down in the Pillbox a while, and by this evening she'll be as good as new. Right, Susie?"

"I-I guess so, Miss Beth."

The pair started slowly up the hill, Beth with her arm around Susie, half-carrying the girl.

By the time Peggy got back to her post the swim period was almost over. She waved to Dorothy, standing on the dock, to tell her everything was under control. Peggy kept her eyes on the swimmers, forcing herself to stay alert. The water looked cool and inviting, and Peggy considered a quick dip after the campers were out, but as soon as Mike's whistle blew a few minutes later signaling the end of the session, Peggy hurried from the dock. During her years at camp she had seen too many kids pulled out of the water to be overly concerned. Besides, she felt Susie was in good hands. Peggy narrowed her eyes. Maybe the hands were too good.

Peggy sighed. She would postpone considering that angle. All she wanted to do right now was avoid seeing Mike.

That's why Peggy hurriedly left the waterfront. Still vivid in her mind was the scene in the cabin with Lilian and Mike glaring at each other. No, Peggy did not yet want to face Mike. For Peggy was embarrassed. Even more embarrassed now than she had been earlier that morning. Because at that time she had been embarrassed for herself. Now she was embarrassed for the redhead.

At dinner, Peggy went through her serving routine mechanically. Afterward, as the campers moved into the various game rooms and the library, and the counselors migrated to the lounge, Peggy ambled out of the lodge, began walking without direction.

"Going my way?" came a voice from the pines, a voice as warm as the balmy night air.

Peggy raised her eyes.

Standing ahead of her on the path was Beth.

Chagrin shot through Peggy. She had wanted to be alone. But the feeling swiftly disappeared. Beth's obviously sincere pleasure in running into Peggy was contagious. As she approached the nurse, who looked neat and efficient as usual in her white outfit, Peggy could not

help responding to the friendly smile that touched her lips.

"Things were so hectic at the waterfront today," she said, "that I didn't have a chance to ask how your date was."

They moved off along the path, side by side.

"It went okay," Peggy said.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

Peggy hesitated. Why not tell the truth? "We broke up," she blurted. "For good, this time."

"Peggy. You were so happy when he called—"

"Not really. I just thought I missed him, I guess." She was silent a minute, thinking that Ted had not changed, that she had known he would not but had hoped that he might have. Hoped because she had needed him, needed him to talk to, to cling to rather than be sucked into the quicksands of evil threatening to engulf her. And he had disappointed her, leaving her still needing and desperately wanting someone to cling to, to rely on, if only for the sake of her own sanity. She sighed. "I don't know, Beth. I'm at a loss about a couple of things. In fact, I feel pretty damned confused."

Beth held a branch out of Peggy's way, then let go when the girl had passed. It snapped back into place, the leaves swishing. "Why not come to the Pillbox with me?" the nurse invited. "I have to take care of a poison-ivy case, but then we can have some coffee, if you like. And if you want to talk, I'll be glad to listen."

A grateful feeling swept over Peggy.

Inside the infirmary, Peggy watched Beth check the prurient splotches on the camper's leg, administer a salve, and send the girl away with instructions to leave the irritated area alone and stay out of the water.

"I'll give Miss Judy some medicine for you," the nurse said at the door. "You remind her tonight before you go to bed to put it on." She shook her head. "Acres and acres of grass and woods, and she walks into one three-foot patch of poison ivy." She gazed around at the compact,

gleaming white clinic. "Come into my hideaway," she invited. "It's not so repulsively sterile."

She led the way into the room that served as her living quarters. Peggy sank into an armchair, while Beth fussed at the hot plate.

Peggy's eyes toured the small box of a place, sparsely furnished, but less rugged and more comfortable than the usual camp quarters. The walls were painted a cheerful yellow. The two windows were curtained. In one corner there was a neatly made bed topped by a flowered spread. A covered card table and two folding chairs served as a kitchen set, and in another corner were visible a half-refrigerator, a hot plate that sat on an all-purpose cabinet, and a sink.

Beth turned from her preparations, slipped off her white shoes and stockings, and stepped out of the white uniform. Peggy was surprised to note that underneath, Beth still wore the orange swimsuit in which she had appeared at the bathhouse. "Things have been so hectic," Beth said, noting Peggy's glance, "that I didn't have time to change."

"How is Susie?"

"Oh, fine. I sent her back to the cabin. These kids snap back so fast they make you dizzy." Beth unpinned her jaunty nurse's cap and stowed it, along with the rest of the uniform, in her closet. She donned a pair of bedroom slippers, then lowered herself into an armchair the twin of the one Peggy occupied.

Peggy marveled at the creamy perfection of the nurse's bare shoulders. Except for faint marks where straps had once masked Beth's back from the sun, her skin was pure golden smoothness. No, not really golden, Peggy thought, but more a hue with just a hint of sunshine, a whisper, as though the sunlight had been teasing the exposed nudity. There was a mellow quality to the skin, and a ripe softness in the quality of the nurse's figure. Her breasts were full and richly curved. There was a maturity to the comely hips. Her legs, crossed in front of her, were unusually long but shapely rather than slim.

"Well, Peggy," she said, smiling, "do you want to tell me all about it?"

How explain to Beth? Better not even attempt it, Peggy thought.

"Oh—it's just what we've already spoken of. New surroundings, new people, new rules and responsibilities." She added thoughtfully, "And new experiences—just confusing—and a bit frustrating at times."

"Is this camp much different from those at which you've worked?"

"Some. The place where I was last year is more a children's resort than a camp; very plush. On the other hand, I've lived in tents and had to pump my own water—it was like one long overnight hike. This is between the two extremes. Also," she continued, "they were both co-ed." Peggy was thoughtful a moment. "You know, it made a difference to the girls—the counselors, I mean. There they were always primping, changing clothes. They always wore lipstick. No one would think of going in the water without a bathing cap. They weren't neater, or anything—but more conscientious about appearance than they are here. Except, of course, some of them. Girls—well, girls like Mike, who don't really care about guys."

"Hey! What makes you think Mike doesn't?"

Beth, I know Mike is a lesbian. I know you are, too. Why not say it, Peggy thought. Just blurt it out. No—no—probably Beth would die of shame. . .

Peggy shrugged. "Mike's not the type. I knew some girls like her in school. They—" She stopped, confused and suddenly embarrassed. How much could she say to Beth? Just how much did Beth already know? Apart from being shamed, would she be angry or hurt if Peggy mentioned what she had overheard at the bathhouse—and what had happened since?

The girl wondered, wavered, trying to decide whether to take the nurse into her confidence or remain silent.

Then came the sound of the screen door banging. A meek voice queried, "Miss Beth—are you here?" Peggy sighed, relieved of the necessity to make a choice. The moment for unburdening herself was past.

"Excuse me, Peggy," the nurse said, rising. She walked out to the clinic, Peggy following out of curiosity. "Well,

look who's here," Beth said, greeting a pair of youngsters at the doorway. One towheaded girl, rather chubby and about eleven years old, hung back, tears in her eyes. The other, of the same age but with pipestem legs and long brown hair, spoke up shyly.

"Carol's sick, Miss Beth."

"And you brought her here? That's nice of you, Doris. Come inside. Carol, can you tell me what's wrong?"

"I—I don't feel well. I really don't," the towheaded one said timidly.

Beth took them into the clinic. In a moment Carol was perched nervously on a tall metal stool, feet dangling, thermometer protruding from her mouth, wide eyes focused on her friend standing next to her.

"Is she okay, Miss Beth?"

"Oh—" Beth seemed to consider the question seriously. "I think probably she'll live."

This evoked a grin from the patient, a giggle from her friend.

Beth checked the thermometer, laid her hand on the girl's cheek and forehead. Finally she spoke: "I think you'd better run along, Doris. I want to keep Carol a few minutes more, and you'll lose all your free time if you stay here."

Doris hesitated. "Well—if she's not very sick—"

Peggy noticed a faint smile cross Beth's face as she dropped her arm around the girl's shoulders and escorted her to the door.

"No," Beth said, "she isn't very sick at all—that's why you don't have to stay. See?"

The screen door closed behind Doris. Beth approached the other girl.

"Get off the stool and sit there," Beth said, indicating a more comfortable chair. "Now tell me," she said when Carol was seated, "where do you feel bad?"

Carol put her hand to her forehead, holding it for a minute. Then she said, her blue eyes wide, "All over. My head aches and my belly—gee, it feels funny." She grimaced, as though in great pain. "Will I have to go home, Miss Beth?"

"Do you want to?"

"Well . . ." She seemed to ponder solemnly. "Oh, Miss Beth, I do feel awful—"

And unexpectedly the girl burst into tears.

Peggy saw the troubled, pitying expression that fleeted over Beth's face. She ran to the chair, slipped into it with Carol raised to a sitting position on the nurse's lap. She pressed Carol to her bosom, hugged and kissed her. "There, child," Beth crooned, rocking back and forth. "You don't have to cry. You'll be all right."

She stroked Carol's dangling legs, patted her, soothed her just as Peggy had seen Susie soothed. After a time, Carol stopped sobbing and began to hug and kiss Beth.

The kids all love her, Peggy thought. I guess that's because she loves them. She's so warm—so affectionate—

Beth now pushed Carol to her feet, and herself stood up, her face a bit flushed. She stepped over to the medicine chest. "I think if you take these pills, Carol, you'll be better by morning."

Beth handed her two pills and a glass of water. She waited a minute after the girl swallowed the medicine, and said, "I bet you feel better already, don't you?"

"Kinda."

Beth tried to suppress a smile. "You run along now. If you still feel sick after lunch tomorrow, let me know. But," she added, "I hope you're okay. Tomorrow night is the beach party, you know."

"That's right! I almost forgot."

"So you try to feel better."

"I will," Carol said vehemently. "May I go now?"

"Sure." Beth walked with her to the door, then returned to her own room, still smiling, Peggy at her side.

"What was that all about?" asked Peggy.

"Homesickness. There's an epidemic going around."

Peggy laughed, and nodded. "Oh, I should have known. I've seen that dread disease in action before."

"It's always the same—one girl gets homesick," the nurse said, "and receives some extra attention, then suddenly a throng of girls have all kinds of symptoms. It's amazing."

"Beth, if you knew Carol wasn't really sick, why did you bother with her?"

"Why not? Health is my job—including mental health, the way I see it. If two colored placebos and five minutes of my time can boost a kid's morale, it's worth the effort."

Peggy wished that two pills—no particular color—could help her.

Or if not pills, then those five minutes of Beth's time.

Why not? Why couldn't she turn to Beth? The nurse was older, wiser. A knowing and sympathetic woman. Someone to lean on, yes—to cling to, as Peggy had hoped to be able to cling to Ted. No doubt she could dispel Peggy's dread of the future.

"Does your job include keeping the counselors happy as well as the kids?"

"You bet!" Beth's smile grew broader. "Why? Are you homesick, too?"

"It's not that simple, believe me," Peggy said. She was remembering, once again, how the nurse had tried to defend her, protect her from harm, during that horrible nocturnal argument in the bathhouse. Yes, Beth was her friend. Even at the risk of acute embarrassment for Beth, of letting her know that her lesbianism was no secret, should not Peggy speak up? How else learn who the other girl in the bathhouse had been—who had crawled in and seduced Peggy's drugged body—who and how many were indulging in dangerous and hateful practices in this camp?

Dangerous and hateful, surely; nevertheless, the thought of love between women sent a swift stab through Peggy's flesh. Her blood stirred. Guiltily, she took hold of herself. She would speak—right now—

But just as when previously she had nerved herself to this point, an interruption came. The same kind of interruption.

Beth's name was shouted from outside. Somebody was again hammering on the screen door. Beth rushed out to answer.

Peggy heard a breathless counselor tell the nurse to come with her immediately. "One of the Juniors fell down

the lodge steps," she panted. "Pam said not to move her until you got there."

Beth hurried back into her room, grabbed a cardigan sweater and a flashlight. She seemed to have forgotten Peggy was there. In a couple of seconds she was gone.

Peggy sat motionless, feeling peculiarly serene. She was illogically sure that the fallen girl would be all right, once Beth got at her. Beth had magic in her fingers, a personality warming and healing. Lesbian or not, what a wonderful person Beth was.

Finally Peggy rose, took Beth's cup and her own and walked to the sink.

After she had rinsed the dishes and set them to drain, her eyes swept the homey room once more. Then she left, filled with an inner glow.

Yes. Beth had defended her once, when she had thought Peggy could not defend herself. She would do it again, if called upon. That was all Peggy had to know. There was someone on her side.

SEVEN

EXCEPT for the uneasiness she still felt in Mike's presence, Peggy's tranquil new state persisted. She had avoided both the husky-voiced redhead and the slim, elegant Lilian since that scene in their cabin, but now, two days later, she knew an encounter with Lilian was inevitable.

Peggy was trudging uphill behind an assemblage of berry-colored hikers weighed down with cooking utensils, canteens, bedding and knapsacks. Peggy herself was carrying on her back a load of food and hardware that would have crushed a mule. Lilian, a hundred paces ahead, was leading the procession.

Peggy urged on a couple of stragglers, then paused to

light a cigarette, shifted her load to the other hand, considering the possibility of avoiding Lilian even now. But that would be silly, she chided herself, as the girls made their way along the winding gravel road, past sloping fields, old farmhouses, huge barns sometimes bright red, sometimes weathered colorless by wind and rain and time.

Most of the dwellings were painted white. The troop paused to admire one such house. It sat near the road on a carpet of thick green grass, decorated with shrubbery and playful calico cats, perfumed by wild rose and lilac bushes, surrounded by stretching acres of rich brown land.

Traffic was exceedingly sparse. Once a pickup truck came barreling down the road and passed the campers. The driver honked and waved—to the delight of the youngsters, who called greetings and flailed their arms in the air. In a flurry of dust and gravel, the truck disappeared around a curve, leaving the girls alone once more. They chattered and sang, marching along at a comfortable pace.

At last they reached the Allister farmhouse, where they were to replenish their water supply. They climbed a slope, rounded the house and clustered around the pump in the back. The pump squeaked and groaned as the girls took turns filling canteens and water jugs.

While the girls pumped, Peggy's eyes roamed the rolling countryside. Idly she wondered if she would like to live on a farm, or at least out in the open, and knew instantly she would not.

"Pretty, isn't it?"

Peggy whirled, and stood speechless.

Standing in front of her was that—that delivery boy. The one she had met in the woods.

"Hi," he said, a lopsided grin spread across his face. "Well, don't look so surprised. I'm Kirby Davis, remember? And this is Aunt Lelia's place." He laughed. "She always insists the girls stop here for water—makes her feel as though she's still part of camp."

Peggy noticed how the sun glinted in his crisp hair.

"Nice view, isn't it?" he said, nodding toward the fields

at which Peggy had been gazing. "You know, most city people who come out here think they would like to stay forever. It's so quiet and peaceful, they say. But inside a week, they would be straining at their collars to get back home to their sidewalks and soot. People today just don't seem able to live with themselves. They have to have someone or something else to—" He stopped. "What's the matter?"

Peggy was staring at Kirby Davis.

"You," she said, "were carrying apple butter, right?"

"That's right. Aunt Lelia's best. She—"

"A heavy load of it, too."

"You're not kidding. Thought I'd break my back."

"That was a peculiar way to deliver it." Peggy pursed her lips. "Do you mean to say that you carried it over the fields and through the woods—all the way to camp—?"

The fellow chuckled. "I'm not that crazy!"

"Well," said Peggy, "what were you doing in the woods, then? That's a funny place for a guy to be—sneaking around in the woods, right on the edge of a girl's camp!"

He gaped. "Say, you don't think—I mean, are you trying to tell me I'm a Peeping Tom or something?" The idea seemed inordinately amusing to him. He broke into a guffaw, slapped his knobby knee. "For your information, lady," he sputtered, "our car ran out of gas about a mile from the main gate. But through the woods it was only a couple of hundred yards to the lodge. So I took the box of stuff and legged it to your kitchen." He guffawed again. "Excuse me for laughing, but . . . Peeping Tom! I'll be damned!"

"A likely story," Peggy said quietly. "Why didn't you just borrow some gas at the camp, then drive the truck in? That would have been easier than carrying fifty pounds of loaded jars, wouldn't it?"

Kirby scowled. "You're not being serious, are you?"

"Hell, yes. Intruders are not welcome around girls' cabins, you know."

"But I wasn't intruding. I felt like such a jerk, running out of gas and all, that I thought I'd better have the apple

butter with me in order to soften up your chef. It was from him that I had to borrow a can, and a siphon. It was his car I expected to get some gas from—and did. Maybe," said Kirby, "it seems silly now, but—"

"Oh, never mind," Peggy said. This fellow didn't look much like a Peeping Tom, anyway. His lean face with its crooked smile was much too frank and open. His tall body, lanky and rather knobby at the joints, struck her as rather attractive. "I was just kidding."

"Sure." He was quite ready to forgive and forget. "What did you say your name was?"

"Peggy Matthews," she told him.

"How do you do, Peggy."

"Well," she said, "the kids are about finished loading up on your water. I guess we'd better be moving on. We have a way to go yet." She waved to Lilian, who blew her whistle. The campers started marching off, some calling goodbye to Kirby.

"Peggy—"

She halted, and he walked toward her.

"Were you thinking you would like to live in the country?"

Anger flashed through her. "No," she said. "Although it would be nice to be able to wander around for a while where no one would bother me."

Kirby's brown eyes widened. He turned, walked away without speaking.

Peggy gazed after him. Why had she been so rude? Was she that fed up with the male sex?

During the hour-long walk from the Allister farm to the campsite, Peggy forgot about Kirby Davis. Stew simmered over the open fire and was eaten. The utensils were rinsed in a nearby stream and boiled in a big black cooking pot. Games were played, stories told.

At last Peggy lay wrapped in her blankets, her thoughts drifting back to her last evening with Beth. She felt as though she and Beth had discussed in detail all the things that had been pulling at Peggy's mind, her sense of relief and well-being was so great. It was hard for her to realize that nothing at all had actually changed.

But at least she could laugh at herself now when she remembered how anxious she had been to test lesbian love. She realized she had been behaving in quite as sex-preoccupied a fashion as Ted, whom she condemned for it.

She still did wonder sometimes about making love with another woman, especially when she recalled Mike's massaging hands on her back—and even more especially, the night of illicit pleasure in the Pillbox. But she knew now that what she wanted and needed—much more than a bedmate—was a friend.

Just then she glimpsed a figure moving among the sleeping campers. She twisted her head to watch Lilian coming toward her, picking her way quietly and carefully among the scattered bedrolls.

"One of the major catastrophes of camp counseling," said Lilian, as she sat down at Peggy's feet, "is the lack of privacy. You're always watching, or being watched."

Peggy sat up, hugged her knees. All right, so here was Lilian. Might as well be as friendly as possible. "Got a cigarette handy?"

Lilian lit one, passed it to Peggy.

Peggy smoked calmly, waiting for Lilian to go on but she, too, had fallen silent. The only sounds were from the crickets and the rippling stream some fifty yards away. Then in the distance, a dog howled. One of the campers stirred restlessly. After the girl had settled down, Lilian spoke again.

"I'm glad of this chance to talk, Peggy. At camp we're always so busy. We never get together for long. And there's practically no opportunity to be alone—one advantage of these hideous sleepouts," she said with a wry laugh.

"You don't like them?" Peggy was shocked.

"Do you? What is there to like? Except that it gets us away from camp routine—which can be even more hideous."

There was no moon, and the stars did not cast enough light for Peggy to make out the expression on Lilian's face. But she was uncomfortably aware that Lilian was staring

toward her. Lilian was shrewd and alert, and had been working at this camp for several years. Surely, if the place were in the slightest tainted by lesbianism, Lilian would know it. Unquestionably, for instance, she would know about Mike, and this would explain her coldness toward Mike. It would also explain why she had not encouraged chumminess between Mike and Peggy; no doubt Lilian had been suspicious of Mike's intentions and had wanted Peggy to be away from her influence. It would explain, too, why Lilian had held herself rather aloof from Peggy since stumbling on Mike massaging her with liniment. All these thoughts were in Peggy's mind as she felt Lilian's stare on her. No doubt she strongly suspected that Peggy had given way to temptation.

Her next words confirmed Peggy's suspicions.

"The thing that beats me," Lilian said, "is that you seem pretty thick with Mike."

"I was," Peggy said. "I don't see much of her any more."

"But what did you ever see in a girl like that? God—she's not even a girl. She's a—a lady wrestler. Peggy, for your own good, there are some things I ought to tell you about her."

"Really?"

"I—"

Lilian hushed. One of the campers was tossing about in her nearby bedroll.

Lilian waited. The girl sat up, rubbed her eyes. She looked around, noticed the counselors close by, and reached for her flashlight. Peggy and Lilian sat quietly as she tiptoed toward them. They recognized her as the cute blond ten-year-old, Susie.

"Miss Peggy," she began in a sleepy voice, "I have to go to the bathroom."

Peggy grinned in the darkness. "You do, hey? Well," she said unwinding herself from her blankets, "I guess we'd better take a walk." Peggy stood up, slipped on her shoes. She took Susie by the hand.

As they tripped their way toward the brush surrounding

the sleepers, the girl spoke. "Do you think I could go on the next overnight, Miss Peggy?"

"I'm not sure, Susie. I didn't know you liked it that much. I'll bear you in mind, and we'll talk about it later, okay?"

The girl nodded, temporarily satisfied.

Peggy patiently killed time while Susie went behind what she considered a proper bush. When she had emerged, she said, "I'm sorry to be such a baby about the dark. But I am, that's all. I'm afraid of it."

As they returned to the sleeping area, Susie was still talking. "Are you and Miss Lilian going to sit up all night?"

"Of course not, Susie. We just had some things to discuss."

"I'm glad," the girl said with obvious relief. She hesitated a moment because they had come to Peggy's bedroll, where Lilian was still sitting. "You see," Susie began, "I want to—" She stopped, took another approach. "Would it be all right—I mean, well, I wondered if maybe I could move my blankets close to you because—"

Lilian said, "Oh, nonsense."

"You're not afraid of sleeping out here, are you, Susie?" Peggy asked.

"Well, kinda," the girl admitted.

"Why do you want to come on more overnight hikes if you don't like them?" Peggy wanted to know.

"I didn't say I didn't like them—I said I was a little afraid. You told us that good campers aren't afraid." She took a deep breath. "Maybe after a couple more overnights I'll be a good camper like you and Miss Lilian."

Peggy stood smiling as Lilian led the girl to her bedroll, and tucked her in. Then Peggy crawled into her own blankets and lay staring through the pine boughs at the star patterns in the inky sky. After a while she was lulled to sleep by the serenading crickets.

She was awakened by a noise. It sounded like someone sobbing. Her first impulse was to reach over and switch on the light, but then she sat up. Those were sobs all right, coming from one of the girls.

Peggy's eyes combed the dark lumps that were campers curled in their bedrolls. She made out Lilian cradling a form, and immediately rose to join her.

"It's all right," Lilian snapped, as Peggy neared the spot. Lilian moved away from the still sobbing girl, and Peggy saw that it was Susie. "She was having a nightmare, that's all," Lilian said. "You didn't have to bother. She'll be fine in a couple of minutes."

Peggy kneeled. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Susie. Miss Lilian is right here in case anything happens. You go to sleep now. And no more bad dreams." Susie stopped crying. Peggy pulled the covers around the girl and stood up.

"Lucky thing I was awake," Lilian whispered. "I'm just not sleepy. Never am on these outdoor jaunts."

They waited a few moments. Susie seemed quiet. Peggy started to walk toward her blankets. Lilian walked along beside her.

"I was telling you about Mike, before," Lilian reminded Peggy. "Now that we're both up, I might as well continue. You see, that girl can do others a lot of harm. She looks like one of those candid, honest types, but she can invent the most awful gossip. Of course, that's far from the worst of it. She . . . Susie!"

The blond ten-year-old stood before them, clutching the bedroll she dragged behind her.

Lilian laughed. So did Peggy. "Oh, I guess I might as well let her sleep alongside me."

"Think you should?" Lilian frowned. "It's against the rules. Special privileges, and all that—"

Peggy was as concerned for herself as for Susie. With the child so close, it would be impossible for Lilian to discuss Mike further, or probe Peggy's relations with Mike. What would happen if Lilian ever discovered that Mike had doped Peggy and abused her on a night as dark as this one—and, worse, had made Peggy like it?

"It's more important that Susie get some sleep than that vague rules be observed," Peggy said. "Go ahead, Susie. Spread your blankets and stretch out."

"Peggy, you're absolutely right," Lilian said, smiling, and strolled off to her own bedroll.

But little Susie was not satisfied. About to fall asleep again, Peggy felt the girl stir, then crawl right in under Peggy's covers. The compact young form snuggled right up close to Peggy's body and contentedly sighed.

Peggy smiled in the dark, and kissed Susie's sweet-smelling blond tresses.

An emotion of peace and profound happiness stole over Peggy. How wonderful thus to be needed and trusted by a child. Of all the gifts, Peggy thought at that moment, the greatest was to be a mother.

Peggy frowned.

Were lesbians ever mothers?

The next time Peggy woke, the sun was peeping over a far hill. Birds were calling to the campers from the trees.

One by one the girls opened their eyes, rubbed at them, and sat up, still huddling under their covers, hiding from the early-morning chill. Several campers were surprised to note Susie peeking out from Peggy's blankets.

Within half an hour everyone was up, dressed, and busy at assigned tasks: tying up bedrolls, collecting firewood, clearing the fire circle, setting out dishes, and preparing breakfast.

Campers and counselors were wolfing down hot chocolate when the camp station wagon pulled up. The door swung open and Pam Michaels, Mike's older sister, slid out.

Pam was a slight girl—not much over five feet, and very small-boned. Despite her frail appearance, she had Mike's red hair, freckled complexion and other characteristics. She strode over to the campers with the gait of a master sergeant.

"Hi, gang," she said in her surprisingly husky voice.

The young campers chorused answering greetings as the assistant director joined Peggy and Lilian. Lilian walked to the fire, poured herself some more chocolate.

"Hiya," Pam said. "How's it going?"

"Pretty good," Lilian said. "But we still have the long walk home."

"Looks like you'll have a nice day for it," Pam said. "Radio says it won't get too hot." She turned toward the girls. "Let's get a move on," she called. "Where are the bedrollers?"

Three campers set down their plates and went with Pam to load the bedding into the wagon. When they had finished, Pam rejoined the group.

"Too bad you aren't ready," she said, grinning. "I could drive you all back."

"Oh . . . you say that every time, Miss Pam," one of the children groaned. "Some day maybe we'll fool you."

Pam grinned and tousled the youngster's hair. She helped herself to a cup of hot chocolate.

Chickie Jones, an oversized eleven-year-old who was the star athlete of the Intermediate group, pushed up to Pam. "I don't see why Susie should get special privileges, Miss Pam. I've been at camp four summers. And I'm not afraid of the dark, so why—"

"What's this?" Pam snapped. "Special privileges?"

"That's right, Miss Pam," chorused a number of girls. And one of them shouted, "Susie slept with Miss Peggy all night!"

Peggy did not feel called upon to make excuses. In fact, she laughed. But not before she had noticed the glance exchanged between Pam and Lilian. Then both girls turned their gazes on Peggy.

"Actually," Lilian said, "the child slept next to Peggy, not with her."

"Oh, no," Peggy said. "She crept into my bedroll. We slept together, all right, but I don't see what's such a special privilege about that!"

"Don't you?" Pam's gray-eyed stare was boring holes in Peggy. She knew there would be no further discussion in front of the campers. But that glare of Pam's promised a session about the matter at the next counselors' meeting. Pam turned away, was suddenly all smiles as she faced the campers. "Forget it, kids. It won't happen again." She finished her chocolate and strode toward the station

wagon, calling huskily, "See you at camp." She left amid calls to "Take us with you," and "We want to ride, too!"

When Pam had gone, Susie walked over and sat down next to Peggy.

"You know," Susie said gravely, "I think I liked Miss Pam better when she was just a counselor. She used to be lots of fun."

"Mean to say you were at camp before?"

"Sure. But I was too young for overnight hikes." Susie paused. "I guess Miss Pam is still kinda nice." Then in the same breath she said, "Isn't Miss Lilian beautiful?"

Peggy glanced toward Lilian who now was standing near the glowing coals. She was wearing pencil-slim red slacks and a matching cardigan over a white blouse. Her black hair was held together with a rubber band at the back of her head and fell in a single long curl down her back.

She certainly did not look as though she had spent the last twenty-four hours outdoors, Peggy mused. Yet as handsome as she appeared, there was an artificiality about her get-up that struck a jarring note amid the natural beauty of the surroundings.

But to Susie, who was patiently waiting for an answer, Peggy said, "Oh, yes. Lilian is quite beautiful, Susie."

"You know," the girl confided, "I didn't like her very much at first. But after you get to know her, she's not so bad. Especially if she likes you."

"Hey, Susie," one of the other campers yelled. "You're supposed to be helping."

The little blonde flashed a smile at Peggy and ran off, all flying legs and streaming hair.

Back at camp, Peggy supervised while the girls scoured the cooking utensils in the large metal sink. They washed and rinsed and dried until they were given permission for a quick dip before dinner. Peggy gladly hurried them off to their cabins to change into their suits, then headed for the lounge where she sank into a straw-backed chair. She could not remember when she had been so exhausted. If

only she could sit there and nap, she thought. She closed her eyes dreamily, but opened them when she heard footfalls. She saw Mike walk through the doorway and fish a coke out of the cooler.

Peggy flushed at the sight of the redhead, wondered what to say—how to say it. Dozens of remarks spun around her brain.

Mike held up the frosty bottle. "Want one?" she asked.

"Please," Peggy answered, glad for the ice-breaker.

Mike reached for another bottle, then sauntered across the room to hand it to Peggy.

"How was your night?"

"Not bad," Peggy said. "I enjoyed it. I think the kids did, too."

Mike took a swig of soda. "By the way, a bit of news," she said. "Your Ted called. I told him you weren't here, but I don't think he believed me."

"Next time he calls," Peggy said, "tell him I went to Patagonia."

Mike frowned. "You mean that, Peg?" In her huskiest tone, she added, "He doesn't seem so bad. I talked to him a while. I thought he sounded like a lot of fun."

"Like a gorilla," Peggy said. "Patagonia," she repeated, tilting up her bottle. "Tell him I went there."

"Whatever you say."

Peggy glanced around the room. Counselors were drifting in for sodas and cigarettes before the evening meal. Some were still dressed in their swim-duty bathing suits, their bare limbs glistening.

Peggy glanced at her own legs stretched gracefully in front of her. The days of sun had turned them a tawny gold. She looked up and caught Mike's eyes traveling down her thighs, too. Quickly, the redhead looked away. She thrust her bottle among the empties, then walked out of the lounge.

Peggy sat quietly, unthinkingly sipping her coke and staring at the pine trees outside the windows. A squirrel, halfway up a nearby oak, stared back. Peggy winked. The thing scampered out of sight.

Peggy sighed, rose, walked out of the lounge. She had suddenly become restless. Just outside the lodge she ran into Beth.

"Going swimming?" Peggy asked, noting the nurse's suit.

"For a few minutes. Join me?"

Peggy's eyes skimmed over Beth's lightly clad body. The pale knit swimsuit showed off her curves to perfection, while its high neck and wide straps hid much of her nakedness. This was not the orange suit. It was of a light-blue material that clung to her well-rounded body, caressing it, molding her fully blossomed breasts and flowing hip line.

Peggy's eyes darted to Beth's face. "I'd love to," she said in answer to the nurse's question, "but I'm just too damned tired. Hiked eight miles today, you know."

Beth smiled. "Rest yourself, then. And remember, whenever you feel like it, drop by at the Pillbox."

Did Beth mean that or was she just being polite? Peggy hesitated. "Okay," she blurted. "Maybe tonight."

EIGHT

PEGGY went to the Pillbox that night, talked for an hour or so, drank coffee. And she went often after that. She tried not to wear out the invitation, but found herself drawn more and more to the cozy room and sympathetic nurse.

She was able to face both Mike and Lilian unashamedly now, although she found little time to be friendly with the redhead, and Lilian, it seemed to Peggy, was being rather distant. Other than that camp life progressed normally.

Pam had not raised the issue of "special privileges" at a counselors' meeting, but instead had spoken to Peggy in the privacy of the camp office. A counselor, Pam had

said, had to be careful about giving the kids any idea that she was playing favorites. Peggy had agreed, had explained the circumstances, had promised to handle such situations, should they occur, in a different way. That had been the end of that.

Peggy knew perfectly well that horror was looking over her shoulder, that behind the facade of wholesome camp activity lurked abominations too dark and terrible to be named. She knew that there were at least two lesbians—her precious Beth, and probably Mike—in the camp. She had a strong feeling that about herself, Lilian suspected the worst. The very word "lesbian" was almost totally new to Peggy's lexicon, had the power to make her shudder, to make her ill. The most awful thing of all was that these creatures were abroad in a camp for children, girl children. Lesbianism in such a setting should be at once exposed, torn out by the roots.

Yet there was no absolute proof Mike was a lesbian. As for Beth, thought Peggy, it was as plain as the nose on your face that she was the most marvelous of women. Far from damaging others, she helped them night and day—and especially, she helped Peggy. She took the alarm and the worry out of Peggy. She opened Peggy's eyes to dawns, horizons, worlds beyond worlds, all by sitting with her sometimes, talking, sharing music over the radio, exchanging smiles and glances. In short, Beth was a friend.

So Peggy was not about to damage Beth by exposing her. Oh, no. It was not indicated. As for the campers, the girls—why, the last thing Beth would do would be to hurt them. She was so tender, so sympathetic and affectionate, with the kids.

Peggy was enraptured with her new friendship and by the end of the first month, as she readied for another overnight, she felt certain that things would run smoothly for the remainder of the summer.

However, that very afternoon found her wrong in her assumption.

Each Friday, every girl in the camp was sent on a hike with one group or another. Friday was the kitchen staff's day off, and as at most camps on that occasion, expeditions

had to be arranged. Friday was the day the canoe trips threaded the lake, the girls climbed nearby peaks, the visits were made to other lakes, other camps.

The overnight hikers, however, usually left on Thursday mornings, spent Thursday night in the open, returned late Friday to meet the other homecoming girls. They were considered an elite group, since only those attending Peggy's campcraft and woodcraft sessions were allowed to spend a night in the open. Lilian, as the senior counselor, was in charge of these overnight hikes, of which there were four each summer, but it was Peggy who actually led them. The camp directors considered this her most important function.

This sleepout had begun as all others. After breakfast the campcrafters had trundled up to the lodge, lugging their bedding and other gear over their shoulders or on their backs.

Peggy watched from the top of the hill, greeting each girl with a bright "Hi." Because of the weight with which the girls were struggling, the reply was usually a mere, "Ugh!" When the girls were gathered inside the main room, Peggy joined them, counted noses, found one camper missing.

After instructing the girls to count off, she told them, "Evens spread your blankets here. Odds over there. Those with sleeping bags, over here." She pointed to another section of the room. "Last trip, our bedmaking was pretty sloppy. We're going to run through the routine once more before starting out."

The youngsters took great pains to lay out their blankets evenly on the floor. Some rounded them three or four times, straightening an edge, pulling a corner, inspecting, then hurrying to the other side once more. Others crawled across the woolen squares on their hands and knees, smoothing ripples as they went.

One nine-year-old made her way to the middle of the blanket on all fours, then stopped, turned to one side so she could examine both ends. Satisfied, she started up, pushing herself by her hands, her little rear end rising first.

Just then a hefty twelve-year-old next to her bent over to smooth a ripple. *Boom!* The two pairs of buttocks smacked each other, toppling the smaller girl into a complete somersault.

The lodge rang with loud, happy laughter, high-pitched giggles, shy twitters. Even Peggy roared.

The noise finally died away. The two girls straightened their blankets once more—being especially careful to keep out of each other's way. Deciding not to wait any longer for the stray girl, Peggy called the group together to watch a bedmaking demonstration.

It was then that the missing girl came in. She stopped a moment in the doorway, her bedding slung across her back. Peggy glanced at her.

Alice Hart was an odd mixture of baby fat and young womanhood. She had a round, cherubic face with full cheeks now flushed from the struggle to get her gear to the lodge. Her breasts, well-developed for a fourteen-year-old girl's, heaved with her heavy breathing, straining against the snug cardigan she was wearing.

The first two buttons of the cherry-red sweater were undone. The third—in a most strategic place—threatened to fly off any second. Even more insecure, it would seem, were her white ultrashort shorts. Peggy wondered how she had been able to struggle into those skin-tight pants, and how soon they were going to burst.

Alice's sandy hair was rolled back in an attempted twist, but one strand had fallen from place, hung straight and straggly to her shoulder.

Her mouth was a pink-red blob of lipstick; her eyes were black with make-up.

Peggy shot a glance at Lilian, whose expression was inscrutable as she said to the girl, "You're late."

Alice crossed the room, her tightly encased buttocks bouncing girlishly, swaying provocatively. She dropped her bundle to the floor, and watched the rest of Peggy's demonstration.

Afterward, while the other girls struggled with their bedrolls, Peggy walked around, advising, instructing, answering questions. She stopped at Alice's side. As the

girl bent to fold the blanket, Peggy held her breath, watching, waiting for the seams of the white pants to explode. But they did not, and Alice stood up, still in one piece.

"Alice," Peggy said, as quietly as possible, "as soon as you finish, you'd better go wash your face. That stuff would get smeared all over you on an overnight."

Peggy could tell Alice was hurt, in spite of the girl's attempt to smile.

"Since you have to go back to the cabin," Peggy continued, wishing she knew some of Mike's child psychology, "maybe you should change your pants, too. It would be a shame to ruin them, don't you think?"

Alice swallowed. "Yes'm," she said, her eyes searching the floor. When she had tied up her bedroll securely and was starting for the door, Peggy called after her.

"I think you'd better bring along a blouse. It might get pretty warm today," she said, hoping the girl would not take offense.

The day never became particularly hot—the sun followed the group behind a cloud screen. But Alice gradually regained her high spirits. She marched along sturdily in blue Levis—tight, but not as snug as the white pants and, in any case, guaranteed not to rip. She also wore a sloppy navy sweatshirt over a white blouse, and sneakers. Her face had been scrubbed to a clean, glowing pink. She had pulled her hair into a ponytail bound with a red ribbon.

At one point Alice dropped back in line to join Peggy.

They trailed behind the other girls for a while, Alice wordless.

Suddenly she blurted, "Miss Peggy, did I look very awful? I mean with all that glop on."

"Why, no, Alice. You didn't look exactly awful."

"But I didn't look exactly good, either, did I?"

"I wouldn't say that. You could probably use some experience in making up, but you'll get there."

Alice hesitated before her next question.

"Do you think—I mean, did I look, you know, sort of glamorous?"

Peggy forced herself not to smile. "You're an attractive girl, Alice. You—"

"But I didn't look glamorous? Not even a little bit?"

"Why do you want to look glamorous? Especially on an overnight?"

Alice examined the ground. She seemed to be studying painstakingly each piece of gravel they stepped on. Then she raised her eyes. Peggy followed her gaze along the line of campers to its head, where Lilian was walking Indian-straight, her regal countenance held high, the black hair swaying in a single braid down her back.

She was wearing slacks of rich brown and a matching sweater. A gold scarf was pinned at her neck. She looked ready for a date, rather than a sleepout, Peggy mused, forcing her attention back to Alice.

"She always looks that way, doesn't she?" Alice said, a toss of her chin indicating Lilian. "Glamorous."

"I guess she does." Peggy looked at the girl, who was gazing wistfully at the front of the line.

Peggy sighed. Kids sure were funny. These crushes of theirs.

Then the irony struck her. What the hell, she herself had a crush, didn't she? A crush on Beth?

Alice heard Peggy laugh and laughed too. What Alice did not know was that Peggy was laughing at herself.

When the girls stopped at the Allister farmhouse, the place seemed deserted. The youngsters refilled their canteens and continued on their way.

They arrived at the campsite, divided into groups to go in search of firewood. Feeling more lighthearted than usual, Peggy ran with one of the parties, hopping the gullies, leaping over rocks, scampering up a hillside. Carrying armloads of kindling, she trotted back with the youngsters.

While Lilian helped to set out the cooking utensils, Peggy supervised the fire builders. The custom was for the girls, some of them seasoned campers, to do all the cooking and serving.

Dusk began to gather as they ate soup and hamburgers. Then they sat around the glow of the fire sucking campfire sodas—peppermint sticks plunged into round, ripe, juicy oranges—and singing camp songs.

Night was quietly drifting over the hills. Concerned by her bad timing—the bedding had not yet been laid out—Peggy glanced at her watch. It was still early. Puzzled, she examined the watch once more. Just then a low rumble from overhead shook the hills. In the middle of a song, Peggy left the circle, rounded the fire to where Lilian was sitting.

"What do we do if it rains?"

"There's no shelter in this area except for the trees. But Miss Duncan won't let us sit out here if it gets bad. They'll send the station wagon for us."

"My gosh, Lilian," Peggy said, her voice rising. "Camp is a good distance away. The kids will be drenched by the time someone gets here."

"Well, I suppose we could start back now, and stop off at the Allister farm. But—"

She was interrupted by a flash of headlights. Both girls tensed as a strange car pulled to a halt and a man slid from behind the wheel.

"Peggy! It's me," he called. "Kirby."

Relieved, Peggy bounded to meet him.

"Hi," she said breathlessly.

The campers were on their feet now, clustered near the fire, excitedly discussing the gathering storm. All eyes were intent on Peggy.

"Have you heard from the camp?" Kirby was asking.

Peggy shrugged. "Nobody's been here yet. I was just talking to Lilian about it." She glanced doubtfully at the dark sky. "I suppose the storm might pass."

"It won't," Kirby said. "They just announced it over the radio—thunder showers early tonight, continuing through tomorrow. Aunt Lelia insisted that I check on you girls. She said if you want, you can stay at the house."

"Oh, we couldn't do that." Peggy gestured with a sweep of the arm. "There are seventeen of us, including counselors."

Kirby smiled. "Aunt Lelia has plenty of room, believe me. Besides—" he grinned—"we can always put you up in the barn."

Peggy hesitated. "I suppose we ought to take shelter there, anyway."

"You'd better hurry up. When this thing breaks—"

Peggy ran to consult Lilian and was back in seconds.

"All settled," Peggy said. "But we have to stow the bedrolls and equipment."

"Load the pots and things in the car with as many girls as you can stuff into the back seat. I'll buzz them over to the house while you and a couple of the kids pack the bedding. I'll be back as soon as I can with tarpaulins."

"Right."

Quickly the cooking utensils and knapsacks were loaded in the trunk. Then Lilian and eight girls jammed themselves into the sedan. Soon they were off, leaving Peggy and the bedroll crew behind.

As the car rolled away, a flash of lightning slashed the blackness overhead.

"Let's go, kids," Peggy called to her helpers.

Mrs. Allister was quite elderly, but spry as a farm filly. Short and stocky, with glinting blue eyes and snowy hair, she was bustling about in a blue chenille robe when Peggy arrived with Kirby and the bedroll crew. As they walked into the kitchen, she turned away from the sink where she had been rinsing cups.

"You sit yourselves right there," she said to the girls, indicating the large, old-fashioned kitchen table. "I have some nice hot chocolate for you." She smiled at Peggy. "The others are all tucked in, though I doubt they'll sleep for some time. You know how children are in a strange place."

She scurried from the sink to the stove to the table, rinsing cups, warming milk, pouring the thick, rich drink for her guests.

"Where's Lilian?"

"Upstairs with her kids."

"Did she call the camp?"

"Not that I know of," Mrs. Allister said. "But I'm delighted to have you all. Lots of room, you know." Her blue eyes twinkled. "I was one of five sisters and four brothers, and we were living on here at the farm even after some us were married and had children. Why, I can remember when—"

"Aunt Lelia," interrupted Kirby, smiling crookedly, "I think Peggy would like to telephone the camp."

"Of course," Mrs. Allister said. "Kirby, you show her where the phone is."

By this time, rain was pelting the farmhouse like buckshot. Crackling thunder punctuated the forked flashes of lightning hurling themselves at the hills. Peggy had trouble getting through to the camp. After fifteen minutes of trying without a result, she decided that the wires must be down somewhere and was about to give up, but just then a local operator came to her rescue. The call was rerouted, and a few moments later Miss Duncan, the director, answered. She sounded beside herself with worry.

"Oh, Peggy! I'm so glad to hear from you. Look, a number of girls got caught in canoes by the storm. They had to beach at the other end of the lake, and the station wagon is out rounding them up. As soon as it gets back, I'll send it for you."

"You don't have to, Miss Duncan. We're all safe and dry."

"Where are you?"

"At the Allister farm."

"Of course! There's plenty of space there, I know. But aren't we imposing?"

"I wouldn't say so. Mrs. Allister is enjoying it, and so are the kids."

"All right. You stay the night. If it hasn't stopped raining by morning. I'll have the station wagon there."

Peggy hung up, returned to the kitchen, and sat sipping hot chocolate with Kirby. Aunt Lelia shooed the rest of the youngsters off to bed, then excused herself. She always rose at five, she explained, and needed her night's rest.

Peggy and Kirby sat quietly, listening to the rain slash the window panes.

After a while, Kirby said, "It must get lonely for you girls, being out here in the wilderness with no guys around."

"I kind of like it," Peggy said unsmilingly.

"Oh, come on. You can't be serious. I bet you don't like it so much that you would turn me down if I asked you for a date."

"I bet I would."

Kirby's face fell. "Are you saying you won't go out with me?"

Peggy swallowed the last of the hot chocolate. "That's right." She pushed back her chair, stood up.

"But—"

"I'd like to go to bed, now," she said.

Kirby jumped to his feet. "You didn't mean that, did you? About the date?"

"I meant it." She turned away.

Kirby caught her by the arm, forced her to face him.

"But look at you," he said. "You're a beautiful girl. Why, you're built like—like a movie star. You must have feelings, desires. It wouldn't be normal if you didn't."

Her hazel eyes blazed into his brown ones. "So maybe I'm not normal," she said coldly.

"Well, I am, damn it!" With that, he threw his arm around her, forced her in close to his lean, hard body. His head came down. He clamped his mouth to hers.

In that first shocked instant, Peggy was too astounded to react. Then she felt a familiar hot stirring in her loins, faint at first, but growing in intensity second by second. Guilt filled her as Kirby held the kiss. Not because of those stirrings inside her. Peggy knew she was a passionate girl. No—the guilt came because she was responding to the same precipitous, self-centered, humiliating approach that Ted used—and every other male used, for all she knew.

Who did this Kirby think he was, Casanova or somebody?

She broke away. Putting all her strength into it, she slapped Kirby's face.

"You'd better show me where I sleep, now."

He was holding his cheek.

Without a word he led the way down the hall.

Peggy did not see Kirby again before leaving the Allister farm. When she got up the next morning, the sun was bright, not a cloud marred the sky. Investigating, Peggy found Mrs. Allister in the kitchen brewing steaming coffee for herself and the two counselors, and more hot chocolate for the campers.

The woman pulled a tray of biscuits from the oven. "Dig in. Better than walking back on an empty stomach."

Peggy thanked her, asked permission to use the phone, then, after talking to Miss Duncan, went to wake the girls. Soon, in shifts, they invaded the kitchen to sip hot drinks and munch warm biscuits swimming in butter and topped by honey or home-made jam.

When Peggy thought they had had their fill, she suggested the clean-up committee help Mrs. Allister in the kitchen, while the rest of the girls straightened the quarters in which they had slept. The gesture delighted the kindly old lady. Reminded her of the old days, she said, when she had been one of the cooks at the camp, and the girls had always been running around underfoot.

Every time Peggy thought of Kirby, she sizzled like a fuse. Why, that egocentric, selfish, assuming lout! A good thing he had chosen to stay out of sight this morning.

The girls returned by a route much different from the one by which they had come. This cut through the woods via an old trail paralleling the stream near which they had intended to sleep. At one point, the stream widened into a deep pothole carved into the rock by centuries of rushing water.

Here the girls paused for a swim. Suits were unnecessary. Naked as plucked birds, the squealing youngsters frolicked in the jewel-bright water until its icy temperature

drove them out. They dried themselves and dressed, then kindled a fire and roasted frankfurters for lunch.

Not long afterward the skies began to cloud up again. All activities and games were called off as thunderclouds gathered overhead. The girls marched for home under forced draft.

At camp much earlier than was usual for returning hikers, everyone cleaned up, then rushed to the lodge. There Pam was organizing indoor games because of the threatening storm. She told Peggy and Lilian that Beth would drive one of them to pick up the bedrolls. "I can't spare more than one of you," Pam said. "Practically all of the hikers are back already." Glancing at the approaching nurse, Lilian declined, saying she would prefer to occupy a few kids with a dancing lesson.

Happily, Peggy walked off with Beth.

The first raindrops were falling.

NINE

THE EXPECTED storm had turned out to be merely a shower. Some lightning. Mild thunder. A patter of rain that had come and gone within fifteen minutes.

Beth backed the station wagon as close as possible to the clearing near the stream. While she opened the back door, Peggy began untying the tarpaulins protecting the bedding.

"Isn't it wonderful out here after a rain?" Peggy said, stopping her work when Beth joined her.

"It's as if God has washed the earth."

"I never thought of it that way," Peggy said. "But it's so true." She gazed around delightedly. "I wish we didn't have to hurry back."

"Well, let's get these things loaded. Then maybe we

can find a dry spot of grass where we can sit and enjoy a few minutes."

One by one the bedrolls were piled in the wagon, Peggy doing most of the lifting, Beth most of the arranging.

When she had handed Beth the last one, Peggy strolled down to the stream. She stood watching the rushing water from a wooden foot bridge.

"Peaceful, isn't it?" Beth commented, joining Peggy.

Peggy nodded, and followed the nurse across the bridge. A massive ledge of rock protruded from the slope, jutting over the stream. Under it ran a dry, grassy stretch. Beth headed toward it, motioned Peggy to sit down with her.

Peggy stared into the turbulent water. "Sometimes I feel just like that inside," she said.

"Now?"

"Oh, not now. Not out here. It's funny, but as wild as that water is, it makes me feel—well, kind of calm." She looked at Beth. "Do you know what I mean?"

Instead of replying directly, Beth said, "Peggy, what's bothering you?"

Peggy caught her breath, surprised. The nurse's soft gaze was searching her.

"Nothing is bothering me. Really."

Beth smiled knowingly. A hand reached out to rest on Peggy's bare arm. "You're growing up, Peggy. That in itself is a great source of mental anguish. But some day it will all seem trivial, believe me."

"You really think so?"

"I know so." Beth sighed. "Try not to be so solemn."

Peggy bravely attempted a smile. But what was trivial about wanting to know whether you were a lesbian or not? Since that idiotic Kirby had kissed her, the issue had become more acute than ever in Peggy's mind.

She may have had good reason to reject his advances, but would a normal girl, feeling the passionate response Peggy had felt, so precipitately shun it—good reason or not? The only deep physical satisfaction Peggy could remember was that achieved at the hands of some unknown woman in the night.

And was it trivial to want to know the identity of that

woman—as well as the one who had forced herself upon Beth in the bathhouse? Was it trivial to stand helplessly by, aware that innocent children at a camp were in the hands of—God!—lesbians?

The word itself, as usual, was enough to chill Peggy's blood. Maybe that was why, unexpectedly, it rose to her lips.

"Beth," she blurted, "do you know many lesbians?"

Peggy was sorry the second she had said it. Aghast at her own temerity, she covered her open mouth with her palm. Probably she had ruined everything, she thought, waiting for an explosion from Beth.

But Beth's expression had not altered. "What makes you think I know any at all?"

Peggy hesitated. If she spoke now, she would never be able to recall the words. Yet what choice did she have? There were things, trivial and otherwise, that she had to find out.

She said, "Beth, I'm positive you know at least one lesbian."

"What!"

"I heard you with her in the bathhouse," Peggy said. "The night you were arguing about me."

Beth jumped to her feet, face flaming. "So that's what's been bothering you all this time."

Peggy nodded. "One of the things."

"Oh, you poor dear. I'm sorry for making light of your problems." Beth's facial color was back to normal. "She hasn't tried anything, has she—made a pass or approached you in any way?"

Peggy could not look at Beth. "Yes—yes, she has." Peggy told of the night she had spent in the Pillbox, of the unknown intruder who had invaded her bed and her dreams.

"And you enjoyed it?" Beth asked.

"Oh, yes! Beth, who was it? You?"

"Don't be a fool. It must have been . . . You know, the one in the bathhouse with me. That's what she was trying to get me to do—slip you some drug so she could . . ."

"Who?" Peggy broke in. "Please tell me who."

"Peggy, I wish I could. But I—I just can't. If I speak that name, all of us will be destroyed."

"Is it Mike? It must be. It's Mike, isn't it? It can't be Pam or Lilian or anybody like that. Dorothy and Ruth have a crush on each other—surely neither would be interested in me. So it has to be Mike. Mike made a play for me. She—"

"Watch your mouth! Lots of girls get crushes on each other, but that doesn't make them gay."

"Gay? What's gay?"

"Oh, skip it. Peggy, I simply can't mention names. I refuse to discuss Mike or anybody else." Beth gazed down at Peggy, huddled at her feet. Suddenly the nurse kneeled, lifted the girl's chin with a finger, forcing Peggy to look at her. In a kindlier tone, she said, "You're afraid, aren't you? You've been afraid all this time."

Beth's voice was calm now, natural, not insinuating. "You're afraid of this girl who violated you—and you're afraid of yourself."

Peggy's eyes flashed to the nurse.

"You're afraid that you liked it too much," Beth said.

"Yes!" In that instant a tumult of confusion rushed over Peggy. She wanted to throw herself into those compassionate arms and cry on the golden shoulder as she had not done since she was a child; she wanted to unburden herself as never before. "Beth, whether I'm afraid or not, I've got to know. I've got to discover what I am."

"You're a nice, perfectly healthy girl. You have nothing to worry about." The nurse edged nearer. One hand fell to Peggy's arm. "All right, so you had an episode with a woman. But it meant nothing. Happens every day. Often young girls like you come into bodily contact with other girls, feel some sort of physical sensation, and immediately begin to have doubts about themselves. They are afraid of their reactions—and ashamed—but that doesn't make them one of my kind—"

"Your kind?"

"That's right. I'm a genuine lesbian, truly twisted, and I know it."

"But what if I am, too?" Peggy said, thinking of her aversion to the male sex. "How am I to find out?"

For an instant she was sure she saw a different expression in Beth's eyes. The kind of expression Ted used to get when Peggy would pull away from him in order to take off her clothes.

But Beth had control of herself again. She smiled, and tried to answer Peggy's question. "You'll find out in time. Try not to let it bother you now. You're much too young to become enmeshed in this sort of thing—no matter what you are."

"Beth, I've got to know." And with more resolution than she would have thought possible, Peggy said, "I want you to kiss me."

The nurse looked away. "No."

Peggy scrambled to her knees. "Please, Beth," she pleaded. "You mean so much to me. Help me."

"Peggy, I—"

Peggy lifted her face. "Please." She moved a little closer. Her mouth was almost touching Beth's.

With a cry that was like a sob, Beth clutched Peggy to her. Beth's lips, soft and warm, touched Peggy's.

At last they broke away. Peggy's heart was pounding. Fever seemed to have possessed her blood. Strange hot prickles assailed her nerves. She looked at Beth—soft and warm and alluring. The nurse was not in uniform now, but in blue stretch slacks donned against the rain and damp. Her womanly hips were faithfully outlined. Her breasts strained against the blue of the button-down man's oxford shirt she wore. Her hair fell in soft waves to her shoulders. How beautiful, thought Peggy. How utterly beautiful. She put an arm around the nurse's waist.

"Oh, Beth—"

"No, Peggy. No more." She started to rise, but the younger girl, stronger, held her down.

Peggy said once again, "I have to know."

"You don't make love to find something out, Peggy."

The girl tossed her head, yellow ponytail flicking like a banner. "I'm not attractive to you? You don't want me?"

"Want has little to do with it."

Peggy forced Beth's hand to touch her full young breast. "Tell me you want me."

"Don't do this to us," Beth begged. "Don't do it to yourself."

"I have to know," Peggy insisted.

"God help us," moaned Beth. Her arms went around Peggy.

The two fell back upon the soft, damp grass, their eager lips clinging. For the first time Peggy knew the sensation of another woman's tongue darting and circling against her own. So acute was the thrill that her bones seemed to turn to water.

Then Beth came up for air. Pulling away, she slowly opened Peggy's simple camp blouse. Loosening the bra, she exclaimed with delight as Peggy's breasts tumbled forth. At first Beth was gentle as she kissed and fondled the trembling, youthful bosom. Peggy's heart jumped as the woman's lips touched each rosy nipple, hands stroking all the while, searching sweetly, trailing fire from the fingertips.

For a while Peggy lay still, basking in every touch, every tender kiss, every deliberately inciting stroke. But as Beth's hands and lips roamed, Peggy began to writhe on the ground. She burrowed closer to the older woman, sent her hand up under the oxford shirt. When her hand touched the soft roundness of Beth's quivering breasts, a glorious burst of white-hot bliss lashed Peggy's body. With reckless lust she loosened Beth's slacks, touched the nylon beneath. At the same time she felt Beth's clever fingers at her shorts. The fingers cunningly slid and stroked."Oh, sweet Beth," groaned Peggy.

No longer could she concentrate on every touch and kiss. Her whole being seemed engulfed by wave upon wave of fiery pleasure. Then, in a burst of purest ecstasy, she crested. The whole world seemed to explode inside of her. Slowly Peggy drifted down to earth. For long minutes she lay quietly, her head on Beth's lap, a hand still on Beth's bare breast.

A sense of utter peace, of profoundest fulfillment, possessed Peggy.

"We'd better pull ourselves together," Beth said softly. "We have to be on our way. They'll be wondering what happened to us."

Peggy sat up, buttoned her blouse, then followed Beth across the bridge. In the station wagon, they both repaired faces and hair.

As the car rolled onto the road, Peggy slouched against the door, wishing she could cuddle against Beth.

Neither spoke during the ride back to camp. Skillfully Beth swung into the parking lot, cut the motor. She turned toward Peggy and was about to say something when she saw Miss Duncan aproaching.

The older woman told them that the most recent weather forecast had reported an end to local thunder showers. The staff had decided to chance a swimming session so the hikers could rinse off some sweat.

"You join them, Peggy. I think you deserve a refresher. We can take care of these things later."

Peggy thanked the director, then sat unmoving, hoping for a chance to be alone with Beth. But one glance at Miss Duncan told her that she was excused.

To Beth, she murmured, "See you later." Then Peggy left the two women.

TEN

LIFE took on a whole new color for Peggy. During the following twenty-four hours, her mind was filled with visions of Beth—sweet, kind Beth, lovely Beth with her fragrant brown hair and dark-blue eyes and gentle hands. No longer did she fear or reject lesbian love. How could anything so good, Peggy argued, not be right? At least for Beth and herself.

Now that she was not obsessed with doubts about herself and about the lesbian existence, she was free to en-

joy all the more her wonderful relationship with Beth. The prospect intoxicated Peggy. She did not weigh consequences.

She looked forward with deep excitement to their next meeting but forced herself to avoid the nurse still one more day. She did not want to become a pest or presume on Beth. But by noon, Peggy knew she could no longer contain herself.

She was standing at her table while the campers filed in for lunch. A cool breeze blew into the screened lodge porch. Peggy took a deep breath of pine-scented air, flavored by aromas rising from tureens of hearty soup in place on each table.

Peggy went through her serving duties mechanically, filling plates, passing them down the line, saying, "You have to eat at least three spoonsful," when the girls objected to the vegetable. She answered questions automatically, and somehow got through the main course. Then dessert was brought out. The jello and cookies lasted longer than she thought they should but it was mail call afterward that seemed unbearable.

And then a song or two. . .

At last, it was over, the whole ordeal. Beth, thought Peggy. Beth . . .

The girls scrambled from their seats, running every which way. Most of the counselors drifted toward the lounge for a quick smoke before rest period. Peggy started quietly toward the door, but was stopped by a voice calling her name.

"Phone for you," a junior counselor yelled.

With a sigh of distaste, Peggy followed the girl, sure it would be Ted on the line.

Gingerly, she picked up the receiver.

"Hi, Peggy. This is Kirby. How are you doing?"

Peggy was stunned into silence. What colossal brass!

"I want to apologize for the other night," he said. "I mean—well, I guess I shouldn't have done what I did. I'm sorry."

Peggy's mind darted back to the quick kiss, the slap.

"Oh," she said nonchalantly, "I had forgotten all about it." Which was no lie, she thought.

"Is that a compliment or a slam?"

"Just a remark."

"Meant to put me in my place, I presume." He seemed hesitant to continue. "Uh—there was one other thing," he said. "I was wondering if you would reconsider getting together some time."

"I told you the other night, Kirby—"

"I know what you told me the other night. I just hoped maybe you would have a change of heart."

"No. In fact, I'm more certain now than before," she said, thinking of Beth.

"Is it me personally you object to?" he asked.

Again Peggy was taken aback by his brass. "You've got a nerve! Of course it's you personally. That was a hell of a thing to do—grabbing me, kissing me—"

"Peggy, we hardly know each other, but please listen," he said. "I never saw a girl so attractive as you. You're the most beautiful thing alive. Sure I lost my head—what guy wouldn't? I'm not sorry, if you want to know the truth. I'll carry that kiss for the rest of my life. I would have risked a hell of a lot more than a slap for it—"

Peggy could not help being a bit moved. "Look, Kirby," she said in a less chilly tone, "I've got to run now. I don't want to go out with you, so let's just drop it, okay?"

"I'd better warn you—I don't give up easily."

"And I don't give in easily," she retorted.

Peggy hung up, amused and a little touched by his compliments and his ardent wooing. However, when she glanced at her watch she cursed him under her breath.

Kirby's phone call had deprived her of a chance to see Beth. This put a damper on Peggy's high spirits. She sulked through the rest period but afterward, on the basketball court, as the minutes slipped by, her anticipation began to mount once more. At last the whistle blew, signaling the end of the period.

Peggy bounded from the court. Quickly she changed into a fresh outfit.

She brushed her hair while her young cabin mates, most

of them already in swim suits, dawdled away the last few minutes before swim period.

"Miss Peggy, aren't you coming with us?"

"I don't have waterfront duty today," Peggy answered brightly.

Another girl said, "You look so pretty!"

Peggy glowed inwardly. "Thanks, honey," she said, inspecting herself in the mirror. A mint-green blouse topped rich brown bermudas that were cinched at the waist by a wide dark belt. A green band held her corn-blond hair away from her face.

Peggy fluffed the blondness and left the cabin, calling, "I'll see you at dinner."

She sauntered downhill, past the lodge and into the Pillbox. There she slouched in the clinic's one large chair while Beth finished with her patients.

The nurse was carefully inspecting a little girl's foot. At last she straightened and said, "I guess you can go swimming today. But keep putting the salve on before you go to bed." She walked to her desk, scribbled something on a piece of paper and said, "Give this to Miss Mike. Then go up and change into your suit."

The girl was radiant as she bounced off the stool. She took the note from Beth. "Thank you," she said. "Thanks, Miss Beth."

"And make sure to dry your feet," Beth called, as the child ran out the door.

Beth turned back to her desk, glanced at some papers, then up at Peggy. She smiled brightly. "Hi. What brings you—business or pleasure?"

"Strictly a social call," Peggy told her.

"Well, step into my social department, said the spider to the fly." She led the way into her room. "Have a seat. I want to get into my suit."

"Are you going swimming?"

"I thought I'd soak up some sun."

Peggy's face fell.

"Is anything wrong? Did you have something you wanted to talk about?"

"No. I—I just wanted to see you."

Beth stood planted in the middle of the room, watching Peggy. "Does this have anything to do with that business the other day?"

"That business!" flared Peggy. "Is that all it meant to you?"

"Listen, Peggy—" The nurse walked over to where the girl was sitting. "I'm sorry about that. I was hoping you had already forgotten it."

"Forgotten?" Peggy was incredulous. "How could I forget it, ever? Why, since it happened, all I've been thinking about is the next time. I could hardly sleep last night. I—"

"There's not going to be a next time, Peggy." Beth spoke slowly, deliberately. Her voice was calm, her tone low.

Peggy sat with her mouth open. "What did you say?" she asked finally.

"I said there is not going to be a next time."

"But why not?" Peggy cried despairingly.

Beth lowered herself to the arm of Peggy's chair. Her eyes rested on Peggy's tortured face. She took the girl's trembling hand in her own. "Peggy," she said carefully, trying hard to choose the right words, "Peggy, you mean too much to me—I can't let you lead a twisted, miserable life. And lesbians are miserable."

"Then why—"

Beth put her finger to the girl's lips. "No questions. If I knew all the answers, maybe I wouldn't have given in to you. Just because I did, and you found kicks in it, doesn't mean you're abnormal. It was a new experience for you, that's all. The fun would wear off with the novelty. And I'm certain that some day you'll find a man who can do as well for you, and probably a lot better."

Peggy glared at the nurse. "How can you say that? I dug it to the limit, Beth. Every minute of it. You know that. I remember everything you did. I—"

"Liking it doesn't make it right, Peggy."

Something burst inside of Peggy. "Right or not," she exploded, "you like it, too! Don't deny it, Beth. I may be a kid, but I know you want me as much as I want you,

and maybe more. Do you think I'm blind to the way you're always watching me? Your eyes are on me all the time—in the lounge, at the lake, here. Every time I glanced up, you used to be looking at me. At first I didn't realize why, but now I know. And right this minute—even if you won't admit it—your eyes tell me that you're hungry for me, crazy to have me. Why fight it?"

Beth's stony gaze met her. "You'd better leave, Peggy."

Peggy's spirit wilted. Her idol was displeased with her. "I'm sorry, Beth." Her voice was barely audible. "I didn't mean to offend you. It's just—" she hesitated—"I want you so much, Beth. I want to do all those things again . . . look at you, touch you, kiss you." She seized Beth's hand. "Please, Beth," she begged. "Let me."

Pulling away her hand, Beth snapped, "Just leave."

"Don't be angry," Peggy pleaded.

"You know, you can't make a habit of coming over here every free minute you have. People may begin to get ideas."

Everything strong and hard within Peggy seemed to melt. She felt her insides slouching. She started for the door, but paused and over her shoulder threw a pleading glance at Beth.

The nurse was watching her.

Peggy turned. "I'm sorry, Beth. I didn't want to make you angry. I don't know what got into me. Our love was so wonderful—I've never felt like that before—I couldn't get it out of my mind. I've been thinking about you every minute. I couldn't wait to be with you."

Beth unbent a little. She took a couple of steps toward Peggy.

"I need you," Peggy whispered. "Really need you."

"Hush." Beth patted the girl's cheek. "I know how you feel, Peggy. I'll always be here. I'm your friend. Come back in a day or two, after you've cooled off. You will, you know. It's all in your mind. Ninety percent of all sexual desire is in the mind," she finished.

Beth kissed her on the forehead.

Peggy walked out, her shoulders slumping.

ELEVEN

PEGGY wrestled with her conscience for the next couple of days, longing all the while for Beth's company, yet conceding it would be best not to court temptation by returning to the nurse's quarters. She wavered between periods of extreme moodiness during which she was ashamed of the commotion she had caused, and long hours of utter bliss because, in the end, Beth had said that she would always be there, that she was Peggy's friend.

Peggy spoke casually on occasion to both Mike and Lilian, but only in connection with their work. Even in the counselors' lounge, Peggy indulged in only enough conversation to preserve the amenities.

Then Kirby Davis telephoned.

Peggy was sitting in the lounge after free swim. She went to the phone reluctantly, heard Kirby plead again for a date, and again refused him.

"Don't you think you'll ever give in?" he asked.

"Look, Kirby—"

"You don't have to hang up already, do you?"

"No," she said. "I'm not busy at the moment. I don't have to hang up.

"Good. You know, what I'd like to do is take you for a nice long walk among the open fields."

"I get my share of walking. Hikes every week."

"But they're not at all the same. To begin with, hikes are part of your job. In the second place, walking on dirt roads or through woods can't compare with tramping over open fields and nice soft grass."

"And where would you find open fields to roam around in? Most of them are planted with corn, or have cows all over them."

"When you get curious enough, let me know."

"I'll do that."

They talked a few minutes longer, Peggy keeping an eye on the clock.

Finally, when she told him her time was up, Kirby said: "Maybe I shouldn't mention it, but I made some progress —at least you talked to me a while."

Peggy could not help smiling.

She thought about Kirby's call again that evening after she had left the throng at the lodge. You couldn't fault a guy for trying, she thought, as she strolled the camp grounds, savoring the quiet.

At the bottom of the hill, Peggy turned, her eyes raised to the mammoth lodge, looming dark and somber except for the yellow light bursting through all the windows. Snatches of song and of laughter came rolling down the hillside. Peggy smiled inwardly, thinking of the youngsters in the big building, each one absorbed in the night's activities, her little mind filled with nothing else.

Suddenly a wave of loneliness surged through her poignantly. She turned toward the lake, a limitless pool of ink bathed in white moonlight.

Walking along the lake fence, kicking at an occasional stone, Peggy thought again of Kirby, of their telephone conversation that day. She wondered why she would not date him. Was she so far gone that a man could not appeal to her at all? Were her feelings, all of them, wholly directed elsewhere? Raising her eyes from the ground, she saw her answer. Standing at the gate was a womanly figure in white.

Peggy's heart hammered.

The nurse turned. "Hello, there," she called, glimpsing Peggy but uncertain of her identity.

Peggy moved closer, her loneliness replaced by wild excitement.

"Peggy!" the nurse exclaimed, recognizing the girl. "How are you? Want to walk along the shore?" she asked, unlatching the gate.

Peggy passed through, brushing against Beth's arm. The

touch sent an electric current charging through the girl. Beth seemed not to notice.

"I've been expecting you at the Pillbox," she said.

Chills crawled up Peggy's spine. But inside her, heat was gathering.

They stood at the edge of the water, where wavelets washed upon the sand, darkening it, then rolling back again.

"I've missed our talks," Beth said, her eyes following the broad path of the moon upon the lake.

Peggy kicked at a pebble. It rolled into the water noiselessly.

The night air was warm and humid. There was no breeze. All was still save for the lapping of the water; leaves did not rustle, no laughter floated from the lodge any more, even the crickets were not singing.

Peggy fought down the turmoil in her mind. She did not think; she waited.

Beth sauntered along the beach. She stopped when she reached the dock, turned, waited for Peggy.

Peggy joined her. "Let's talk, shall we?" Beth said, her voice cool in the hot night, cool as a breeze.

Peggy nodded dumbly. They sat down on the foot of the dock, a girl and a woman silhouetted against the moonglow.

Peggy pulled off her shoes, dangled her feet in the wavelets.

"I regret that I had to be so short with you the other night," Beth said. "But the way you were carrying on was unbearable. It wasn't like you at all." Beth paused. "I realize," she said, "that you're under a tremendous strain, Peggy, and I know I've had a part in causing it."

Peggy dragged a toe through the water, concentrating on the ripples it left.

"Do we have to discuss it, Beth?"

"I think we should, don't you?"

Peggy shrugged.

"Peggy, your age is a trying one for most girls. But you've been exposed to more than the run-of-the-mill problems. You're riding the horns of a most serious

dilemma." As Beth spoke, the moon hid behind a cloud.

In the thickened dark, Peggy began to swing her legs, feet splashing lightly.

"I can sympathize with you probably better than anyone else you know," Beth said sadly. "I want to help you, Peggy. I—"

Peggy jumped erect on the dock. "I don't want your sympathy. I don't want your help—or your pity or anything else . . ." She grabbed her shoes. "Just leave me alone," she sobbed, hurrying away.

"Peggy!" The nurse scrambled to her feet. "Peggy, wait a minute."

As Beth tore after her, Peggy broke into a run. She was rounding the far end of the bathhouse, planning on a cut through the woods to the seclusion of her cabin.

The sand was cool and damp on her bare feet. She stopped crying, took a deep breath, clutched her shoes to her chest and sprinted across the beach. She could hear Beth running across the wooden planks of the bathhouse float, taking a short cut in hopes of catching up.

Peggy stumbled, dropped a shoe. She backtracked, picked it up, started on her way. Beth, right behind her now, caught her by the arm, knocking her off balance. Peggy sprawled on the ground.

"I wasn't finished," Beth said breathlessly.

Peggy sat up. She glanced at the nurse, then away. She contemplated the beach in front of her. The moon emerged from the masking cloud, rendering the sand a silvery gray.

"Don't you see?" Beth asked, dropping down next to Peggy. "It won't do you any good to run away. Face things squarely. Get yourself under control."

Peggy said sullenly, "I don't want you to feel sorry for me, that's all." She pulled on her shoes. "You said it's partly your fault. Well, it's not Beth. You can't help the way I am, any more than you can help the way you are. It's not your fault at all. Besides, you've done me a lot of good. Really, you have." She was looking at the nurse now, talking to her rather than some spot on the ground. "You were doing lots of good even before—before any-

thing happened between us, before I told you I heard you that night down here. Just being with you has always made me feel better."

Beth waited until she was certain Peggy had finished. "I understand," she said. "And I'm glad. But now that I know what's bugging you, I can do you even more good. I can open your eyes to what lesbianism is, Peggy. It's not a game, or a habit you fall into or out of at will. A lesbian is something you are—or aren't. If—"

"How do you know I'm not?" Peggy demanded.

Beth's gaze did not waver. "How do you know you are?"

"Because I've had a taste of being one. Because I want it more than I want love with boys."

"Peggy, try to understand. You were here, one day, at a strange place, with strange people—strange girls. You learned another girl wanted to seduce you. You were terrified by the prospect, but at the same time excited. After that, a row with your boy friend. Tensions mounted. And then—" Beth hesitated—" then you found out what it is like to make love with another woman. That served as both an emotional and a physical release, and a powerful one. So you decided you were a lesbian."

"Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not. I only know that a few minutes ago, when I saw you, I was bursting with want of you. I wanted you to kiss me, thrill me—and instead, you pitied me." Peggy paused. "Beth, you said yourself I'd find out eventually whether I were a true lesbian. So what difference does it make if I find out here, now, this summer with you—or if I wait till next year or some other time?"

Beth looked at the girl steadily. "Because if you wait only six months, that will be six months' less torment for you."

Peggy frowned. "Is it really that bad?"

Beth nodded emphatically in the moon's platinum glare.

"What I can't understand," Peggy said, "is your concern. Someone must have initiated you, and I'm sure you don't hate her."

"It's not that I'm worried about your hating me some day, Peggy."

"Yet it means something to you that I don't succumb."

"Of course it means something."

"But why?" Peggy demanded. "Why should you care? You enjoyed our sex together as much as I did. You must still want me. And you certainly know I want you. So why can't we please each other? Why can't we act the way we want to when we're alone? What difference does it make, as long as we both know what we're doing—as long as we both want to? Why should you care what I am, what I become, if we can be happy together even for a little time? Why should it bother you if I become a confirmed lesbian because of this summer?" Peggy gazed up into the nurse's eyes. "Why, Beth?"

"Because I love you."

TWELVE

BETH sucked in her breath, completely startled by her own words. Obviously, she had not meant to go so far.

Her eyes locked with Peggy's. Then the nurse recovered herself and broke the trance.

Forcing a smile, she said, "Yes. I mean in my own peculiar way, I feel affection for you. A kind of motherly love, you might call it. A protective instinct."

"You're not old enough to be my mother," Peggy said quietly.

"Well, I sort of feel that way toward all the girls at camp. I love them all—you know?"

Peggy shifted position so her body was closer to the nurse's. "Beth, you don't have to hide it. Don't you know that I love you, too?"

Peggy had not considered it before, but now she was certain of her feelings for this woman who had befriended

her, stood up for her, guided her in a strange, new kind of consummation.

Before coming to this camp, never in her wildest imaginings would Peggy have conceived of two women making declarations of love to each other. Yet it did not now strike her in the least strange that Beth and she were speaking to each other as if one of them were of the opposite sex. The only thing strange, as far as Peggy was concerned, was that she had not realized before that she was truly, gloriously, irrevocably in love with Beth.

Yes—she was wholly certain of her feelings for this woman who had befriended her, defended her, and guided her to the most profound physical fulfillment.

"Oh, I do love you," Peggy swore. "I need you. Why can't we make each other happy? Why must we fight ourselves? Why can't I touch you—" Peggy's hand reached out, her fingers trailing over Beth's cheek—"feel how soft and delightful you are, whenever I want to? That's not wrong, is it, Beth—to want someone, want to touch her? It's not wrong when you love somebody, is it?"

Beth brushed a wisp of hair from Peggy's face. "No, Peggy, it's not wrong. But we must be sensible and draw the line. There's no reason we can't see each other often, have our usual talks, go—"

"Everything but make love, right? Well, I'm sorry, Beth. Sex is a part of love. Everyone knows that. I can't be with you and not want you—and I won't fight it any more. So make up your mind. Either we must part entirely—or you must be mine entirely." Peggy rose.

Beth reached out, pulled the girl down. "Why do we always have to argue?"

"We don't have to." There were tears in Peggy's eyes.

"Peggy—" It was barely a whisper.

In the silence that followed, the two hearts were pounding as one. Bathed in moonlight, the women stared hotly. Then the air stirred. The gentle breeze seemed to be all that was needed to move them together. Their lips met.

With that kiss, the floodgates burst open. The pent-up passions of the young counselor and the mature nurse emerged in a hot, rushing tide that flooded them both.

Tensions were washed away. Fears and hesitations were drowned by surging lust.

Yet both knew that this was not the time or the place. They might be seen. They might be overheard.

As if the thought had struck the two simultaneously, they drew apart sharply. Beth threw a cautious glance over her shoulder. Peggy's eyes warily searched the shadows on every side. Reassured, they turned back to each other, smiling fondly, tenderly.

"No more arguments?"

"No more arguments," Beth promised. "I may as well enjoy you while I can."

Peggy sat up straight. "I wish you wouldn't talk like that."

"Why not? I think of you as a butterfly—liable to take wing at any moment. Young people do tend to be flighty."

"But this is different. We love each other!"

Beth laughed. "Don't start that again, or I'll be ravishing you right here on the beach. You're a terribly tempting little hussy, you know."

"Your hussy."

Beth rose reluctantly. "I think we'd better get back," she said.

Peggy nodded, slipped on her shoes.

Together they left the lake, careful to latch the gate behind them.

Halfway up the flagstoned path that led to the lodge, Beth said, "I think I'll stop at the Pillbox a minute. I'll be in the lounge later. If we run into each other there, be careful. Let's not act particularly interested in each other."

The pair halted. In the ghostly lunar glow, their eyes met and held. Beth's look was a caress, Peggy's an embrace. It was their only farewell.

Peggy watched until the figure in white disappeared into the night, then continued on toward the lodge. Strange, she mused. Her body no longer ached with passion. The flood of desire had waned. Instead, she felt satisfaction, content, a welling of affection and tenderness.

A joyful shout ahead of her broke into Peggy's thoughts. Pushing the past minutes with Beth into a secret place in

her heart, she hurried up the lodge steps. She collected her kids, herded them to the cabin and into bed. She decided to stretch out on her cot in the dark, and think over the events of the day.

She was asleep before her campers were.

The following day passed swiftly, but too slowly for Peggy. After dinner she was making her way up the lodge steps once more, when she was stopped by Ruth, the petite blonde.

Involuntarily, Peggy looked around for Dorothy. This time, the tall riding mistress was not in evidence.

"Say, Peggy," said Ruth, "my girls are planning a masquerade ball for their program night, and we wondered if your cabin would like to help out."

Peggy considered. "We haven't decided on anything for our night yet, and that sounds like fun. I'll ask them."

"Good. Let me know as soon as you can."

"Will do," Peggy promised, continuing on her way.

That evening's activity was being organized on the basketball court, leaving the lodge quiet and desolate. The silence permeating the big structure seemed to jar more profoundly than noise ever had. Peggy's footfalls echoed hollowly as she walked into the lounge, a book and writing tablet under her arm. She wondered if she were the only one in the building.

It was not yet dark, but a stillness had settled over the grounds, broken only by cricket calls.

Peggy sat down at the conference table and contemplated the paper in front of her. Then she jotted a quick note to her parents, telling them all was well.

Finished, she folded the letter, stuffed it into an envelope which she addressed and stamped, then gathered her belongings and left.

It should be time, she thought. It was too late for any more kids to visit the infirmary, unless some emergency developed. She fervently hoped there were no patients staying overnight.

At the door of the Pillbox, she rapped soundly and called, "Anybody home?"

Beth came to greet her, bright and even more cheerful than usual. "For you, always," she said, pushing open the screen door. "But aren't you supposed to be other places?"

"It's my night off," Peggy answered, walking toward Beth's room. "Those of my colleagues who are unassigned, like me, are driving in to a movie that I've already seen. I told them I was going to stay behind to do some letter-writing and catch up on my reading."

She lowered herself into one of the chairs, dropping her book and pad to the floor.

"So why aren't you?"

"Writing and reading? Because I'd rather be with you."

"I'm flattered." Beth curled up in the other large chair, asked, "What are you reading?"

"A book of short stories. I just finished that famous one by Somerset Maugham about a missionary and a prostitute. He—"

"I saw the movie they made from it," Beth said. "It just proves how weak the flesh is."

Peggy glanced away. "How weak men are, you mean." She was suddenly compelled to tell Beth about Kirby Davis, about the time the big goof had had the effrontery to kiss her. But no sooner had she mentioned Kirby's name than Beth interrupted.

"Oh, you mean Lelia's nephew. I know him. He comes around every summer. A nice boy."

"Nice?" Peggy laughingly told of the stolen kiss and mentioned his attempts to wheedle her into going out with him.

Beth said, "I think you should."

Peggy stopped laughing. "Should what? Go out with him?"

"You should make it a point to meet people."

There was a pause.

"Especially fellows, you mean," Peggy said.

"Not necessarily. Just people who can broaden your outlook, widen your horizons. People can be an education, you know."

"Hm. You're right," Peggy said, rising. "Take, for example, what I've learned from you." She perched on the arm of Beth's chair.

"Be serious," Beth said, her breath coming a little faster.

"But I am." Peggy bent to kiss the nurse on the mouth. When she pulled away, she looked at Beth with wide eyes. "Serious enough?"

"Too serious," Beth answered tensely.

"That's just a taste. Go over there," she said, waving toward the bed, "and I'll show you how really serious I can be." Beth hesitated, not smiling now. "Come on," Peggy said, taking the nurse by the hand. "No more arguments, remember?"

She pulled the nurse to her feet, drew her to the covered bed.

They fell to the bed together. "Undress me," Peggy begged. "Take my clothes off and kiss me."

Beth yielded, eagerly peeled off the sweatshirt Peggy wore. There was no bra under the baggy garment. Peggy's girlish yet copiously developed breasts, vibrant with life, crowned by pink, virginal nipples, drew an agonized cry from the nurse. She buried her face in the soft, lovely mounds. "Oh, Peggy, my darling," Beth whispered against the delicate flesh.

At the touch of Beth's cheek upon her bosom, Peggy felt heat leap in her veins. Then Beth's hands were drawing off Peggy's slacks, at the same time fondling the girl's lithe thighs, the long legs so adorably molded and curved.

Peggy's impatience gathered. She sat up, seized Beth by the hips, kissed her on the lips with ferocious hunger. Why, the woman drove her wild! Now it was she, in her turn, who tore at clothing. She pulled off Beth's shoes, drew down her white stockings. She loosened the white uniform at the sides, jerked it from Beth's body. The nurse stretched out on the bed, a fine figure of a woman, clad only in pale bra from which spilled rich creamy mounds, and in silky white briefs that clung to her milky thighs, her rounded and velvety hips. Even these garments annoyed Peggy. She fussed with them until they were off.

Beth lay unclad at last—breathtakingly seductive, her voluptuous charms wholly revealed, wholly accessible.

"Beth?"

"Yes, honey."

"Which am I, the aggressive partner, or the passive?"

Beth laughed. "Where did you hear of such things?"

"Read about 'em in a book, once," Peggy said.

"Well, don't you know which you are?"

"Guess I'm both," Peggy confided mischievously, blushing.

"Little minx. In that case—let's take turns. You make love to me—then, well, I'll do the honors."

Peggy joyously threw herself into the nurse's arms. But passion was so strong upon her that she quickly withdrew her mouth from Beth's, filled her hands with Beth's heavy, delicately textured bosom. In her palms Peggy felt the nipples, in rosy glory, swell and stir. Beth squirmed with delight. Peggy boldly probed lower. Her fingers, with a timeless knowledge of their own, seemed to home unerringly on the unutterably secret nerve clusters that bestowed on Beth the sharpest bliss.

The effect was to evoke in Peggy a feeling of power, of mastery. She controlled Beth. Beth was her slave. She pushed buttons, and Beth danced. Lust came down on Peggy like a red cloud, and in her new wild power, she viciously pinched Beth's soft thigh. "Oh!" groaned Beth. Peggy gritted her teeth and with one heave turned Beth over on the bed. She sent a stinging slap to Beth's quaking buttocks. "Oh!" gasped Beth. "Please. Please, Peggy?"

"You pretty bitch. Tell me you love me. Tell me, or—"

"No! Don't hit me again. I love you, Peggy. I love you."

Peggy thrust her forearms under Beth's armpits, cupped the big breasts. She wrestled the nurse into a supine position, then threw herself upon her.

Wildly, the girls locked to each other. Their bodies were gleaming now with sweat. Lip to lip, breast to breast, thigh to slippery thigh, they heaved and gyrated, ecstasy rising like a lava wave. Eyes rolled, fingers clutched, light hair mingled with darker. Skin slithered slickly and long legs

kicked. Murmuring blissful endearments, panting like beasts, the counselor and the nurse felt the white-hot wave engulf them, drown them in fiery exaltation while their very guts shook and convulsed.

"God!" intoned Peggy, limply falling back on the bed.

"Leave God out of it," whispered Beth. "This is devil's work, pure and simple."

"Pure and simple?"

They both laughed. But Beth, perhaps because of exhaustion, nevertheless seemed somber, even sad.

For many minutes they lay side by side, Peggy curled up, her hand resting affectionately on Beth's breast. After a time, she felt Beth's nipple alive again in her palm.

"Oh, Beth, you do want me, don't you? You didn't mind my being a little rough—"

"No, dear. I understand about that." She drew Peggy's hand away from her breast, raised it to her lips and kissed the fingers.

"Beth," whispered Peggy, eyes shining, "it's your turn now. Do everything. Teach me all about what lesbians do."

The nurse could not help smiling at Peggy's ingenuous eagerness. She sat up. "I've said it before and I'll say it again. You're a hussy. A shameless hussy."

"A delicious hussy! Try me."

Beth bent breathlessly to minister to Peggy, who now was the one lying supinely on the bed.

But unlike the prior wooing of the younger girl, the attentions of Beth seemed deliberately void of fondling, of stroking, of any bodily contact at all, save that established by the nurse's fragrant, tender kisses. First they were devoted to Peggy's mouth, sucked and savored like a crushed red berry under Beth's lips, probed and wickedly teased by Beth's flicking tongue.

Then the lips nibbled delicately at Peggy's earlobe, sending the softest of sensations coursing through the girl, sensations building and broadening as the nurse kissed her neck, her shoulders—and then, as Peggy stiffened in taut response, her passion-swollen breasts. Each nipple was moistly enfolded, wetly warmed. Beth's

lips artfully tormented. The tip of her tongue rasped and tweaked. Then when Peggy thought she could stand this cruel titillation no longer, when she thought her bosom was about to burst with bliss and she pleaded for mercy, for respite, Beth's mouth moved on.

Peggy felt the brush of Beth's cheek on her navel. She flamed as Beth's hair trailed a prickling caress along the sensitive skin of the torso. "Damn it, Beth. Please," she pleaded, as Beth had pleaded before. "Oh, please. Beth!" Beth kissed on. Her lips were wet and lined with silk. Her tongue fluttered like a butterfly. . .

Later—much later—when the heavy breathing of the two unclad forms on the bed had quieted to normal, when only the sounds of the night were to be heard in the room—the crickets' chirping, the rustling of the warm night breeze, the trees, the soft lapping from the lake-shore— Peggy spoke up. "People are an education, all right."

Beth shifted, propped herself on an elbow.

"I hope by the end of the summer you'll have learned more than that from me," she said.

Peggy lay against the coolness of the fluffy pillow, her blond hair rumpled, her eyes closed. A look of complete satisfaction etched her face.

"I've learned enough for two summers," she murmured, but on opening her eyes to look at Beth, she noted the gravity of the woman's expression. She said, "I hope you know what I mean, Beth. I've learned what happiness is."

Beth said nothing, nor did her face become less grave. Her eyes bored into Peggy, studying her, weighing her, and—so Peggy felt—accusing her.

"Look," Peggy burst out, "none of this is anyone's fault. And we—we enjoyed it, didn't we?"

"Too much, maybe. Peggy, don't you realize you may be marking yourself for life? Don't you think you should make some effort to fight it?"

"Oh, if it will make you feel any better," Peggy retorted, "I'll go with Kirby the next time he asks."

"Promise?"

Exasperated, Peggy said, "I promise." And then, with a grin: "Always worrying about me, aren't you?"

"Always," Beth answered.

"Well, don't. This is my off time. I don't have to show up at my bunk until morning."

Beth moved closer. Kirby and everything else were forgotten for the remainder of the night.

THIRTEEN

WHEN KIRBY called, two days later, Peggy evaded him no longer. "Drop by here about ten o'clock Sunday."

"It's a date," he said happily.

As soon as she hung up, Peggy had regrets. What was she trying to prove?

But in spite of herself, when Sunday arrived, she enjoyed the expedition with him.

He picked her up at camp, drove her directly to a back section of his widowed aunt's property. Leaving the car, they started walking across an untilled open field. Peggy became lost in a world of green pasture and blue sky.

Pausing under a lone apple tree, Peggy could feel Kirby's eyes on her. She knew she looked especially attractive in her pink flowered skirt and touch-of-pink blouse cut to show off as much of her golden tan as possible. Her light hair, held back by a pink ribbon, fell to her shoulders. The breeze gracefully teased both skirt and hair.

She felt wondrously carefree.

"Come here," Kirby said, falling to the ground under the trees and pulling her down next to him. "Tell me about yourself. You're such a stranger. All I know about you is the way you look—and slap."

She told him where she was from, where she was going

to school, what she was studying. "And that's about the story of my life," she finished. "What about you?"

"Taking my Master's at State. Psychology—just like you. I'll finish next June."

"Then what?"

"I'm not sure. I hope to get my doctorate."

Peggy laughed. "And I thought you were a simple farm boy!"

"Well, I am. I come here summers to help out Aunt Lelia."

Peggy covertly studied the lad next to her. He was slouched against the tree, chewing on a blade of grass. His brown eyes roamed the green and gold fields, resting occasionally on Peggy. She found him easy to talk to—much more interested in listening, apparently, than in impressing her with his own words. He seemed so relaxed in her company that it made her feel relaxed, too. They began to walk again, after a while, drinking in the beauty of the day.

Suddenly Kirby said, "Hey, you must be starving!" He looked at his watch. "Let's drive to town and feed our faces."

The day wore on—pleasantly, soothingly.

Peggy got back to camp a few minutes before the evening meal.

She hurried to the lounge, looking for Beth.

"Hi. How did it go?" Beth asked as Peggy walked in.

She sat down next to the nurse. "As you said, he's nice. One of the nicest fellows I've ever dated."

Beth nodded, a glimmer of a smile in her eyes.

"That reminds me," she said. "Ted telephoned today."

"What did he have to say?"

"I don't know. Mike talked to him. Sorry you missed his call?"

"Are you kidding?" Her thoughts reverted to Kirby. "You know, you were right, Beth. I do have to get out and meet people."

"There's mess call," Beth said, rising as the notes of the bugle reached them. "Let's go in and eat."

At the table, remembering Ted's phone call, Peggy wondered if he were contemplating another visit. If so, maybe he had mentioned it to Mike. She glanced around, hoping to catch Mike's eye. But the redhead was not at her regular seat. Night off probably, Peggy thought.

She did not run into Mike until the following evening in the lounge. But just as she approached the girl, the telephone rang.

Mike jumped from her chair. "I'll get it!" She bounded to the wall box. Seconds later, a doleful look on her face, she held out the receiver. "For you, Peg."

"I'd have called sooner," she heard Kirby say, "but I never know when I can get you during the day. Peggy, I can't wait to see you again."

Peggy did not answer. What should she do? Encourage him? After all, her heart lay elsewhere.

"When will it be, Peggy?"

She hesitated. Then, feeling like a traitor, she said, "My next day off. I'll call you."

After the kids had been put to sleep in the cabin, Peggy rushed down to the Pillbox. She found Beth in her room, making coffee.

"I was expecting you," Beth said.

"Oh, Beth—I've gone and done it. I promised Kirby I would see him again."

"That's what I want you to do."

"But—honestly, Beth, I feel as if I'm cheating on you. Are you sure you won't mind?"

"Of course not. Kirby is worth knowing."

Peggy kissed the nurse on the cheek. "You're an angel," she said. "Why are you so good to me?"

"I like to see you happy."

Is that what love is, Peggy wondered—the unselfish desire to see a loved one happy? If so, and if she desired as much for Beth, why had she accepted another date with a man? Despite Beth's denials, Peggy was sure the nurse was inwardly bitter about it.

But if it were not love she felt for Beth, Peggy asked herself, what was it?

Hell, that's silly, she thought. I love Beth. No question about it. If I didn't, I wouldn't be risking everything to lie in her arms.

"Problems?" Beth asked, noting Peggy's expression.

"Tell me the truth, Beth. The honest truth. Doesn't it bother you to know I'm going out with somebody else?"

Beth sank into a chair. "To be honest, certainly it does. But it's the right thing for you to do." Beth's lids masked her eyes.

Peggy sank to her knees before the chair, looked into Beth's face.

I do love her, Peggy assured herself. I love everything about her. She ran a fingertip across Beth's thigh.

"Beth," she said. "Does a person always know when he—or she—is in love?"

Beth's eyes fluttered open. "Not necessarily. Why?"

"No reason," Peggy murmured, closing in on the nurse.

During that next date with Kirby, while riding back from town, Peggy asked the troublesome question. What is love? He admitted that he could not answer, and looked at her strangely.

That was the only uncomfortable moment of the day. He did not make a pass at her. But they laughed and joked and talked of many things—and Kirby revealed what to Peggy were astonishing depths of profundity, refreshing attitudes. Peggy's respect for him had grown enormously by the time he returned her to camp, just after nine o'clock.

Before leaving the car, Peggy raised the question of love once again.

"Do you think enjoying sex with someone means that you love the person? I don't mean just raw passion. I mean something—" she thought of her days and nights with Beth—"something good and—well, beautiful."

"Not necessarily," Kirby said. "Sometimes a thing is beautiful because we want it to be."

"You mean it's all in the mind?" Peggy was echoing Beth's words.

"You could say that. Of course, very often a person uses sex as a substitute."

"A substitute for what?"

"A lot of things—-love, affection, the need to be needed. People sometimes try to find these things through sex."

Kirby had cut his lights. Peggy stared through the windshield at the rising moon.

"Will you be able to get to your cabin without a flashlight?" he asked.

"Oh, sure. I could find it with my eyes shut."

She waited, out of politeness. She expected him to try and kiss her good night.

But he made no move.

"So long, Kirby," she said. "Thanks for a wonderful day." With that, she stepped from the car. She picked her way across the parking lot, found the path to the hill.

At the turn-off to the Pillbox, however, she saw ahead of her the familiar figure in white.

"I thought you'd be along soon," Beth said. She took the girl's arm, led her toward the infirmary. "Have a nice time?"

"Very."

"I'm glad. What kept you so late?"

"We were talking," Peggy said. Rather reluctantly, she followed the nurse into her room.

"Sit down," Beth said. "I could hardly wait until you got back. Thank heaven, we have the whole night ahead of us." Beth kicked off her shoes. "Would you like something, dear? Tea?"

"Not right now."

"I have a bottle of Scotch, you know." Beth slipped off her stockings, stepped out of her uniform. "But I don't think we should drink in camp, do you?" Beth loosened her bra.

Peggy forced her eyes away, glanced at her watch. "I think I'd better go, Beth. It's getting late, and—"

"But you're on leave until morning!" Beth sat down on the bed. "Aren't you happy to be here with me?"

Peggy could not understand her mixed emotions. She forced herself to smile. "Of course I'm happy." She walked to the bed, let her hand drop to the soft brown hair.

"Let's lie in bed and talk a while," Beth said eagerly.

"All right." Peggy began undressing. What had come over her, anyway? Had being with Kirby affected her? Had his words given her doubts? Standing in her filmy underthings, she hesitated. At the moment she wished that she could escape.

"Let me," Beth said. Deftly she loosened Peggy's bra.

Peggy could not help the tremor that passed through her body, as she felt her heavy breasts touched.

Now Beth's hands were on her hips, rolling down the silky half-slip.

Peggy turned her nakedness toward the nurse. "Beth, usually you accept me only under protest. You try to argue me out of it. Why are you different tonight? You're eager. You lead the way—"

"Darling, I'm afraid I've changed. You've made me need you. Oh, I fought it, and I told you to fight it—but it was a losing battle, I guess. Peggy, you're so lovely. You're so fresh and clean and thrilling—" She held out her hands. "Come to bed with me."

They embraced, warm nakedness against warm nakedness.

"Yes," Peggy choked out. "Let's go to bed."

But even as her hands roamed the treasures of Beth's body, as they passed over curves and swells and plumbed secret depths, a part of Peggy was elsewhere.

Oh, she heard Beth crooning, she could feel the heat and sense the passion alive in the nurse; yet it was as though Peggy were an onlooker, a nonparticipant in the emotions she had aroused.

She had learned the intimate nerves of Beth—the places where a touch makes a woman squirm and moan and cry out for more. And diligently, if automatically, Peggy tried to please—kissing, teasing, probing, rocketing the nurse

into space, higher, higher still, until with a cry of ecstasy, Beth reached the ultimate heavens.

Peggy held Beth in her arms. She could feel the beat of the woman's heart. She kissed the soft, sweet-smelling hair. Beth sighed, inched closer to Peggy.

At last Peggy noted Beth's even breathing and hoped the nurse would fall asleep. Peggy closed her own eyes.

Then her lids shot open. There was a hand on her breast. She covered it with her own, stopping its slow caress.

"What's wrong?" Beth asked.

"I'm just tired."

Beth burrowed closer still. "You're never too tired for this."

"Beth, I—"

"Here's something that will wake you up."

Peggy shuddered as the nurse's hands passed over her.

"You like this?"

"No—yes . . . Beth, please!"

"Please what? This?"

"No."

"How about this?"

"You're torturing me," Peggy moaned.

Beth laughed. "And you like it."

Peggy squirmed under her touch.

"Don't you like it, Peggy?"

Dumbly, the girl nodded.

"You like this . . . ?"

Peggy's blood began to boil.

"And this . . . ?"

Her thighs quivered.

"I know everything you like. You like—"

Peggy gasped.

"Enough?"

"Yes."

"Sure?" Her hands continued to move.

Peggy's head was getting light.

"Do you want more?"

Peggy convulsed.

"Here?"

"Oh!"

Beth was relentless.

The room began to spin; the room and the bed and Peggy and Beth. Peggy clutched the nurse, held on for dear life as she soared on the wings of blissful agony. And then everything exploded into a hundred thousand pieces . . . whirled like a celestial kaleidoscope . . . and slowly fell back into place.

Peggy rested her head on Beth's breast, struggled to catch her breath. Beth's hands stroked her soothingly.

As she drifted off to sleep, words seeped into Peggy's brain. *It's all in your mind . . . sex is a substitute . . . something is beautiful because you want it to be . . .*

Several evening later, Peggy sat by herself on a wooden bench on the lodge porch. Beyond the circle of the ceiling lamp, black night stretched bleakly; no moon, no stars. Kirby had been over a couple of times to walk with her when she had had time off. But this night Peggy wanted to be alone. She had thinking to do.

What she had to blame herself for, she realized, was not so much that she had fallen in love with another woman, had for better or worse slipped into a degraded way of life. After all, that concerned only Beth and herself. And maybe there were excuses for it.

But there was no excuse for having neglected to ferret out the twisted degenerate who had coerced Beth in the bathhouse—who perhaps had doped Peggy and certainly had ravished her. A person capable of such behavior was capable of anything, it seemed to Peggy. Such a person could violate other counselors, even the children. That person had to be identified, ejected from the camp.

Peggy did not blame Beth for refusing to name the person. She knew that in retaliation, the unknown one could expose Beth, destroy her and perhaps others. More important, the reputation of the camp would be ruined. What parent would ever send a daughter there?

Nevertheless, Peggy resolved to concentrate thereafter on running down the menace. After that, she would figure

out some way of dealing with it. Peggy frowned. Once again, in her mind, she ran over the possibilities.

Lilian? Hardly likely. She was too unabashed about showing her own body, too frankly curious concerning the other girl's bodies, as Peggy could testify. It seemed to her that a lesbian would disguise such interest, would be on her guard about it, although it was perfectly natural among girls at a camp.

What about Dorothy and little Ruth? As the summer had worn on, these two had been seen more and more in each other's company. They took their days off and their nights off together. They thought nothing of being seen walking with arms about each other's waists. Occasionally they even shared the same cot. Then there was Dorothy's constant talk about men. That could be disguise, of course . . .

And speaking of disguises, what of the masquerade? Dorothy had come dressed as a man. The children had been delighted. Dorothy had been obliged to dance with each of the senior girls—but after the dancing, she had gone strolling with Ruth.

Peggy sighed. She had seen many such crushes among girls, at camp, at school. They did not necessarily mean a thing.

But Mike—she was another matter. Peggy lit a cigarette and thought carefully. Mike had that husky voice, the kind difficult to overhear if she had been the girl in the bathhouse. Peggy made up her mind to resume her former camaraderie with Mike, get her talking, try to find out where—

Peggy heard footsteps.

Speak of the devil!

Mike was walking up the stairs, dressed in yellow skirt and blouse, low-heeled sandals, earrings. Peggy was amazed at the transfiguration the outfit made in the girl. The yellow certainly did things for Mike's bronze tan. She looked amazingly girlish and pretty.

"Hi, stranger," Peggy said with a smile. "Big occasion?"

"I guess you could call it that," Mike said uneasily.

"Day off. See you, Peg." And she rushed in, bound for the lounge.

Peggy scowled. Mike had been disappearing from camp quite a lot, lately. Where did she go? And with whom? She never spoke of her adventures. Why the secret life?

Peggy checked her watch. Close to ten. Restless, she rose and started for the lakeside. She could not resist the moonbeams glowing across the water.

She went only as far as the gate. There she stood long minutes, watching the ripples leave the spotlight and move to shore. Then she turned and began the trek up the hill to her bunk.

Camp was so different at night, she thought. So quiet—serene, actually. Peggy dragged her feet, hating the idea of crawling into bed, wishing she could spend all night wandering the dark, peaceful hills.

In the distance an owl hooted. Peggy shook off a mischievous impulse to answer him. Branches rustled as she hit a bush. Then she heard leaves somewhere nearby. A squirrel, she thought. Or maybe a chipmunk. She swept her light up the path.

She stopped sharply, startled by a figure flashing just ahead of the light beam then disappearing into the trees.

Peggy ran to the spot where the figure had dashed across the path. Were the kids up to something?

Cautiously, Peggy left the path, pushed her way among the trees. Brush crackled. She scanned the foliage with her light but saw nothing.

Then ahead of her a twig snapped. She heard an unladylike curse and scrunching leaves.

Peggy moved stealthily, circling the area with her flashlight. She saw nothing but rocks and tree trunks and fallen leaves and twigs and—

She held her light steady, focused about twenty feet in front of her on a crouching form.

Peggy moved closer.

The girl, rubbing her ankle, looked up.

Alice Hart!

Peggy hurried to her. The girl's eyes, wide with fear,

stared up at Peggy. There was a bruise on Alice's cheekbone. Her disheveled hair hung to her shoulders. Peggy could make out a deep scratch on her neck. She clutched a torn bathrobe about her.

"Leave me alone," she said, as Peggy approached.

"What happened, Alice?"

"Nothing." The girl moved her leg and winced at the pain. "I fell down," she said.

"Before that—what were you doing?"

The girl would not answer. Peggy reached out to help Alice get up.

"Don't touch me!" she cried in abject terror.

Peggy stepped back. She stared at the youngster hunched there on the damp earth. "Come on, Alice. You've got to get out of here." She reached out once more, put her hand on the girl's arm.

At her touch, Alice let out a bloodcurdling scream. Peggy jumped back, alarmed.

"Alice," Peggy whispered, as though to compensate for the girl's noise, "you'll wake up the whole camp."

Peggy looked around for a limb to serve as a cane. She found one hanging from a low branch, suspended by only a few fibers. She broke it off with a resounding crack.

Returning to Alice, whose eyes followed her every move, Peggy held out the limb.

"Here," Peggy said softly. "This will help you walk."

The girl's eyes moved to the branch.

"Come on," Peggy told her.

"No," the girl said in a frozen tone, her eyes riveted on the stick in Peggy's hand. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone . . . leave me alone . . . leave me alone . . ." she repeated, voice shrilling into a hysterical singsong. Then with a last wild shriek she tore her eyes from the limb, buried her head in her hands and began sobbing uncontrollably.

Peggy swung the branch to her shoulder, and moved one step toward the girl.

"What's going on here?" a voice boomed behind them.

Peggy whirled to face Pam, taking the blinding beam of a flashlight full in her face.

FOURTEEN

PEGGY blinked and turned away. When she opened her eyes, all was black with white and gold and red flecks swimming in front of her. She blinked harder.

"What's going on?" Pam repeated.

Peggy stuttered out what she knew of the story. While she was talking, Mike came rushing through the shadows behind her sister. She caught the last of Peggy's explanation.

Pam turned to Alice.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"I got nothing to tell," the girl said bitterly.

Pam did not insist.

"Come on, then. Let's get you to your cabin."

"Her foot is hurt," Peggy cautioned. "I think she fell."

Pam cast Peggy a furtive look. "Mike, help Alice up. See if she can walk."

Mike braced the girl, managed to get her to her feet. As Alice threw an arm around Mike, her robe fell open.

Peggy's jaw dropped. Pam said, "Christ!" The front of the girl's pajamas had been ripped open, exposing her tender, maturing breasts. There was a scratch near one pink nipple, similar to the one Peggy had noticed on her neck.

Hastily Alice gathered her robe about her, her eyes darting to each of the three counselors.

Pam growled, "Mike, get her to Beth right away. Peggy and I are going to see Miss Duncan. Peggy, here, has a lot of explaining to do."

"But—"

"Save it," Pam said to Peggy.

"Pam, are you accusing her—"

"I'm not accusing anyone, Mike. I merely said that she had some explaining to do."

"My God, she explained everything to you. And you know what Duncan will do."

"It's my job, Mike."

"You're acting too hastily."

"Mike, I've caught her in action before. At one of the sleepouts, she had that Susie kid in the hay with her all night."

"But she'll be fired on the spot. You—"

The meaning of it all hit Peggy with an impact that left her speechless and thoughtless. Peggy was being accused of whatever horror had befallen Alice.

The rest of the conversation drifted to her through the fog clogging her brain—and left her even more incapable of thinking when Mike's final words came through:

"But I know she had nothing to do with it," the redhead was saying. "I'll swear to it. She—" Mike faltered for only an instant—"she was with me."

She was with me . . . she was with me . . . with me . . . me . . . For hours Peggy lay awake, trying to reconstruct everything that had happened from the moment Mike had walked up the lodge steps.

Peggy rolled to her side. She jammed her fists into the pillow, damp with perspiration. She remembered that when Mike had burst out of the bushes, she had been wearing jeans and sweatshirt. The fancy clothes had been gone.

Pam had finally been convinced, had promised not to report the incident to Miss Duncan for a time—provided Beth would approve. And provided Mike was able to do some profitable detective work in the next couple of days.

Peggy was no longer under suspicion. Or at least, no longer being accused.

But why—why had Mike lied?

Peggy sat up, her knees clutched to her chest. Was Mike guilty; had she committed the offense, then used

Peggy as an alibi? But why? If Mike had remained silent, Peggy would have been dismissed immediately and the case probably forgotten.

Peggy thought hard once more.

A chilling thought suddenly touched her, making her stomach churn. Of course! Common sense at last had made her realize there was one other person who might molest a camper. Members gathered in her mind: Beth and Susie, Beth and the other girls. . . .

If Beth would fondle an ailing ten-year-old in broad daylight, what would she do to a well-developed fourteen-year-old in the dark of night?

Peggy thrashed on her bed.

She could not wait for morning to come.

Beth stubbed out a cigarette.

"For God's sake, Peggy, will you listen to me? I had nothing to do with it."

Peggy was relentless. "What happened last night after she got here?"

Beth took another cigarette from the pack on the desk. "I looked her over, mercurochromed the scratches, and put her to bed in the next room."

Peggy remembered her one night as a patient, and shuddered.

"Was she doped up? Did you crawl into bed with her?"

The cigarette stopped halfway to the nurse's mouth. "Don't be ridiculous."

Peggy searched Beth's soft face for signs of guilt, found none. It is the same soft face, with the same gentle mouth, the same compassionate expression.

"Now calm yourself, Peggy," she was saying. "I'm not angry with you for accusing me. I know you're strung up."

"Thanks," growled Peggy. She would have loved to believe the nurse innocent, but other images were forming in Peggy's thoughts—girls in the Pillbox, girls clustering around the nurse as she walked through the camp grounds, girls rushing to hold her hand or give her a bouquet of wild flowers. . . .

"Alice will speak, maybe, after she gets over her fear. What did you do, Beth—threaten to kill her if she ever opens her mouth?"

"If she speaks, it may bring tragedy to many of us," Beth said. "But I hope she does—I hope she does—"

Peggy turned on her heel, marched out of the Pillbox.

What bothered her now was that she was involved with this woman, involved with the whole debauched pattern that numbered Alice as its latest victim.

Peggy walked along slowly. Could she ever break out of it?

There had to be a way. A way to escape this sickness, or at least find out if she could.

Chin firmly lifted, Peggy went to the lodge and called Kirby.

"Can you meet me tonight? After taps?"

"Any time, any place. You know that."

Kirby picked her up at the gate.

"Take me to some nice, lonely spot. A quiet one."

"Sure. I suppose those noisy kids can get on your nerves after a while."

He swung the car around. Twenty minutes later he turned into a remote dirt lane.

He switched off the ignition, adjusted the seat, and laid his head back, gazing at the stars.

Peggy moved, so that her soft thigh brushed his hard one. Her head was nearly touching his shoulder.

He got the message.

"I've been waiting for that, Peggy. After the time you slapped me, I resolved never to make advances—not unless you let me know you wanted them." He sighed. "It's been difficult. You're more than beautiful, Peggy. You're entrancing, enchanting—" And his arm went around her.

She waited, knowing he was going to kiss her. She wanted him to. When his lips pressed hers, her own lips parted, accepting his kiss, returning it.

The kiss persisted as his hand tightened on her shoulder, as his arm drew her closer.

Peggy's hand crawled around his neck, her fingers tangled in his hair. Still the kiss did not break.

She twisted in the seat, touching his lean body.

They broke away, then. Peggy was facing him, her legs curled under her. Neither of them spoke.

She rested her head on his shoulder, and could hear the thud of his heart under his thin shirt.

"Kirby," she said, "you think sex is beautiful when two people are in love, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And if they're not in love—if they don't feel anything for each other?"

He thought a moment. "I don't know, Peggy. I've never made love to a girl that I didn't feel something for."

She raised her head. "Never?"

He shrugged, guided her head back to his shoulder. "I couldn't, Peggy. A lot of guys do, but not Kirby."

"What about me? Could you make love to me?" The tremor in her voice gave it a strange, childlike quality.

"Foolish question." Kirby swallowed. "Do you want me to make love to you?"

"Would it be—good?"

"It would be the best."

She did not hesitate. "Then I want you to."

Kirby squeezed her to him. "Peggy—do you know what you're doing?"

"I think so."

His words tumbled out eagerly. "I have a blanket in back. I'll throw it on the ground. We can sit there for a while—you can reconsider if you like—"

"Do you always carry a blanket around?" she asked, surprised that she should care.

"It's Aunt Lelia's picnic blanket." He laughed. "Do you think I keep it around for—for special occasions like this?" He took Peggy's face in his hands, kissed her. "I told you. I'm not the wolf type, understand? I have to care for a girl."

Peggy tried to hug him, but he broke away.

"I'll get the blanket," he said gruffly.

He spread it carefully, took her by the hand and led her to it. Peggy sat down, gazing through the open ceiling of trees at the glittering stars. The night was warm. Crickets were murmuring.

Peggy's eyes ran up the trunk of a gnarled old tree that bushed into a profusion of leaves and branches. She felt as though she were in a dream. Who was she? What was she doing here? Who was the man?

Kirby's lips on her throat brought her back to earth. He nuzzled her hair, trailed his lips to her ears, then found her mouth. He pressed his lips to hers, holding her, pulling her to him so that her breasts met his hard chest.

Lips still locked, Kirby lowered Peggy to her back. She clung to him, so that his body smothered the rise and fall of her throbbing breasts.

His tongue slid forward into her mouth, touching, circling, caressing, sending a fever of delight along Peggy's spine.

Kirby shifted his weight. Now one hand was free to cup and caress a molded breast.

Peggy's hands moved over his broad back, rounded his shoulders, played in his hair. His hand on her breast stroked and tenderly squeezed, teasing the hidden nipple, hardening it. It was she, impatient, who sat up and got rid of her blouse.

A thin, lacy strapless covered Peggy's heaving breasts. Kirby ignored it at first, kissing, caressing around it, trailing his lips below, above, while hands and fingers outlined the filmy bra, barely touching the hidden breast.

Then he sat up. He pulled off his shirt.

And then her bra.

Peggy lay still while Kirby's eyes drank in the beauty of her heavy breasts bathed in the silver moonlight. Then a finger touched the berry tip; a hand gently squeezed, smoothed. "Peggy," he whispered. "Darling Peggy." His head came down. His lips and tongue and teeth made a feast of her bosom.

For Peggy, the world had turned to passion. She twisted to feel him against her, thigh upon thigh, bare flesh against bare flesh. She moaned and squirmed and, finally, tear-

ing him from his newfound treasure, forced his lips to hers, hot and demanding. His weight and heated flesh came bearing down on her. The feel of him—all of him—against her, the heat of his hard, muscular body, filled her with flame. Yet Kirby would not be rushed. He played with her and gentled her, handling his weight so that it would not crush or exhaust her. He devoted himself far less to his own pleasure than to hers, neglecting no effort however sustained, no exploration however intimate. The result was that unbearable tensions built up in Peggy. Blissful as was this reverent love-making, she wanted him wholly, completely . . . now!

He sensed by her murmurs, her writhing, that the time had come for ecstasy. Hearts pounded, blood raced, bodies tore at each other until finally all reason fled, leaving only lusts to be fulfilled. The pair became one, bathed in the luminous glow of the moon. Locked in the eternal embrace, she felt utterly pierced with delight, and moving to receive this man, this marvelous Kirby, she moaned with the ineffable pleasure of it. The countless silver-bright stars above seared the dark sky with their brilliance. Yet all of these—the stars and earth and moon—joined the sun itself, coming together within Peggy's being. The infinite light, the limitless heat, filled her to bursting, then erupted with such force that her very soul was shattered. Her teeth sank into Kirby's shoulder as joy like sheer pain coursed through her.

And slowly all the world fell into place around Peggy, and after a while she herself felt whole once more. Kirby, in whose arms she rested, Kirby too was there.

She smiled. She had learned something.

"Peggy," said Kirby brokenly, "I—I think I love you."

She stroked his rumpled hair.

"Peggy—how do you feel about me?"

"I think you're a doll," she said. She could not commit herself to anything more. Not while she was still involved with Lesbos. Not while mysteries remained to be solved. "Take me back to camp now, will you?"

And she kissed him.

FIFTEEN

THAT night Peggy had little trouble sleeping. She was full of elation. As slumber came over her, she was remembering Kirby's embrace.

In the morning, the camp scene seemed normal enough. Everyone—not excepting Pam and Beth and Mike—calmly went about their usual routines. How long would Pam let things ride, Peggy wondered. More than that, she wondered when and where Alice's attacker might strike again. She decided to keep the closest possible watch on Mike, even if it meant neglecting her duties.

Before the swim period that afternoon, Peggy hurried into her suit and ran down to the lounge. She expected Kirby to call her. She was rubbing suntan lotion on her shoulders when Lilian walked in, a brief purple halter covering her ample breasts, skimpy shorts of the same purple below. Over her shoulders she had thrown a bright pink shirt.

Peggy looked at her in surprise. "Where's your suit? Aren't you going in today?"

Lilian shook her head. "I've had all I can take of the squealing monsters for a while." She eyed the lotion bottle. "Like some help?"

"No, thanks. Just finished." Peggy capped the bottle and sank into one chair, propped her oiled legs on the arm of another.

"If you're going to make it down on time, you'd better be on your way," Lilian advised.

"I'm waiting for a call."

Lilian lifted an eyebrow. "Ted?"

"I should say not. Why I haven't heard from him in ages. I don't think he'll bother calling any more."

"Don't be too sure."

A frown took over Peggy's face. "Meaning what?"

"Ask Mike," said Lilian.

"Why Mike?"

"Didn't you know?" Lilian snickered. "I thought gossip spread like wildfire in this place."

Peggy stared. "What are you talking about, Lilian?"

Lilian did not answer right away. Her eyes were focused on the white line above Peggy's breasts where the suit, as usual, had slipped a little.

Noticing, Peggy pulled the suit into place, fastened the straps.

Lilian grinned. "Modest?"

"And how. Lilian, will you please tell me about that gossip?"

"Sure." She lit a cigarette. "It's all very simple. Your friend Mike has been dating your lover."

"What!" Peggy jumped up. "Listen, I've got to get down to the water. See you later, Lilian."

Flying down the steps, she stumbled, almost fell. Grabbing the rail, she proceeded more cautiously to the bottom of the hill, then broke into a run, charging through the line of swimmers standing at the gate.

She caught Mike just as the swimming instructor started to climb the high tower. Running along the dock, Peggy called out to her.

Mike stopped, a foot resting on the first rung. She turned her red head toward Peggy.

"May I speak to you a minute?"

"Sure." Mike backed away from the ladder.

Peggy hesitated, looked around. No one was actually within hearing distance. "Well . . . you know how people talk around these places. I heard someone say something . . . I mean, it was about you and Ted. Mike, have you been going out with him?"

"What makes you ask that?"

Peggy shrugged. "I told you—I heard someone talking. I didn't believe it, anyway." She began walking off.

Mike said in her huskiest voice, "Wait. Who gave you the tip? Lilian?"

Peggy backtracked. "Yes."

"That figures." Mike lifted her whistle, blew it sharply. "Get back there," she called to a camper poking a leg into the water. "Swim doesn't start for five minutes." Then the redhead hitched up her tanksuit, looked Peggy in the eye. "I thought you said you didn't care about Ted."

"I don't."

Mike's face burst into a grin. "I'm glad. You told me you didn't want him, but I thought maybe I was doing you dirt, you see, and I was trying to keep it hidden." She gripped Peggy's oiled shoulder. "Yes," she said, "I've been going out with Ted. I'm crazy about him. And I think he likes me." The grin grew broader. "I've got the muscles to handle him."

"Mike, just one more thing. Did you make it with him?"

"Make it?" Then Peggy's meaning reached Mike, and her face colored beet-red. That was answer enough.

Peggy looked away. "I shouldn't have asked that—I'm sorry,"

"Forget it. And if you want to know why I lied for you after they found you with Alice—well, I know you wouldn't harm a kid."

"Who would?"

"I have an idea. I have to get proof. Otherwise, Pam will give you the gate despite anything we can do. She's meeting with Miss Duncan this afternoon. They may call you in."

"Anyway," Peggy said, "I'm glad about you and Ted. I wish you the best, both of you." Right there in front of the whole camp, Peggy pecked Mike on the cheek. "Listen, can you excuse me from this swim?"

"Why not? There are plenty of counselors on hand today. Now we can be friends again, hey, Peggy?"

"Oh, you're so right!"

The girls smiled at one another. Then Mike lifted the whistle and blew two blasts. "Take the boat, Mary," she called huskily. "Helen, watch those Juniors. All right, everybody. All in!"

Sixty squealing campers hit the water simultaneously.

Away from the waterfront, Peggy drifted into the woods back of the bathhouse. She crossed to a clearing and found a stump to sit on. She propped her elbows on her knees, rested her chin in her hands. She was in a turmoil.

She had thought she had the Alice-mystery solved. Mike had been the culprit; she had heard Peggy on the path and had fled from Alice. Then Mike had circled around, making it look as though she had come from the cabin after hearing Alice's scream. She had lied not for Peggy, but to give herself an alibi. It had been that simple in Peggy's mind.

But now . . .

Mike, apparently, was no frantic, dyed-in-the-wool lesbian type, ready to risk everything to pounce on girls like Peggy and Alice. Mike was gone on a man.

So if not Mike—who? Beth? Maybe Peggy should go to Miss Duncan right now and report the nurse. Peggy looked at things a lot differently, now that the experience with Kirby had demonstrated that she was not bound to lesbianism.

Yet it would be wrong to unjustly damage Beth. If only it weren't for all this mystery . . .

A twig snapped behind Peggy.

She whirled.

Ten paces down the path stood Lilian, still in the pink and purple outfit, her black hair pinned in a swirl atop her head.

Recovering from her fright, Peggy managed a smile. "God, you scared me. I—"

Something in the other's look stopped her. "You shouldn't have run out of the lounge in such a hurry," Lilian said. "I wanted to talk to you."

Peggy frowned. "What about?"

Lilian stepped closer. "About what you are going to do to stop what goes on between Ted and Mike."

Peggy shrugged. "I'm not going to do anything. I couldn't care less."

"I'm glad it doesn't bother you." Lilian stepped still closer. "That's what I wanted to hear. You really don't care for men at all, do you?" She laughed. "Say, how

about walking me to my cabin? I have a new bathing suit you can try on."

"Not now. There's a lot on my mind. I want to think."

"I understand, Peggy. I understand perfectly." She placed a hand on Peggy's arm. "You can trust me. I know what's bothering you. It's this business about you and men, right?" She took the girl's hand and led her to a fallen tree. "Let's sit over here," she said. "I'll talk to you about it."

Peggy examined the trunk for insects, then brushed the bark. She had suddenly decided to play along. She was curious about what Lilian might have to say. She sat down.

Lilian sat next to her. "I hope this treachery of Ted's has taught you something."

"Like what?"

"Merely that men are bastards."

Peggy laughed. "Every one?"

"All of them," Lilian went on. "They are good-for-nothing, conniving—"

"Why are you so sure?"

"If I started telling you, we would be here for hours. Just take my word for it." She patted Peggy's bare thigh. "Besides, I don't feel like talking, after all. I'm not interested in words any more."

Peggy smiled. "Just what are you interested in?"

Lilian's eyes were burning. "You," she said.

Peggy stared at the raven-headed girl in front of her. She stared first without comprehension, then in disbelief.

"M-me?" she stuttered at last.

"That's right, Peggy. You. I've watched you since the minute I first laid eyes on you. And now—" she lifted her arms—"I'm going to have you."

Peggy jumped from the log.

"Don't be startled, dear. You'll like it, I know. I remember your reaction in the Pillbox, when I sneaked into your cot. I—"

Peggy broke in, crying, "Then it was you with Beth—that night—in the bathhouse!"

Fury flamed in Lilian and she leaped up. "Who told you about that?" She grabbed Peggy's wrist. "Beth? I'll kill her."

Peggy twisted to free herself, but Lilian had a firm grip. And the short struggle seemed to intensify her odd lusts, whet the sharp appetites already raging in her.

She grabbed Peggy by the back of the neck, forced her lips on Peggy's. Peggy squirmed, writhed her head, but to no avail. Lilian's mouth was clamped to hers with maniacal fervor.

With her free hand, Peggy grabbed at Lilian's arm, digging her nails into the tender skin, knocking the pink shirt to the brown earth. Lilian pulled away from her, but only enough to crack her across the face with the back of her hand. Then she broke into mad laughter. "You're a bitch when you're awake, aren't you!" She moved with smooth skill and suddenly was behind Peggy, holding her in a hammerlock. "But that makes it all the more fun," she whispered into Peggy's ear. "Now, don't move, or—" And she lifted Peggy's captured arm slightly, sending a stab of pain all the way to her neck.

She felt Lilian's other hand move around from behind and cup her green-covered breast. Then Lilian's fingers crawled over the top of the suit, poked inside.

Peggy's breathing quickened, not with desire but with indignation.

She raised her hand to Lilian's arm. The black-haired girl squeezed the quivering breast. "I said don't move."

Peggy trembled with helpless rage. In the water, because of her lifesaving training, she would have known how to break the hold. On land, she had learned already, Lilian had more skill, and almost as much physical strength. Peggy stiffened. The other girl was running her hand up and down the curves hidden by the green bathing suit.

That gave Peggy an idea.

She edged back toward Lilian. Now she felt the firm breasts against her, the thighs pressing her buttocks. She

could feel Lilian's hot breath on her neck. "Lilian," she whispered, "Lilian—oh, that's good. You were right. Feel me, Lilian. Unzip me—"

Lilian laughed, pulled at the zipper. She retained the hammerlock carefully, but with her other hand pushed down the bathing suit so that Peggy's breasts broke free. Lilian's fingers again hefted and tweaked the lovely mounds.

"Oh—that's so good, Lilian," Peggy moaned. "Kiss me, Lilian, kiss me!"

Triumphantly, Lilian relaxed the hold. She spun Peggy around, sunk her lips to Peggy's mouth.

In that instant, Peggy came to life. Her head butted Lilian's chin. At the same time, one hand clenched Lilian's wrist while the other grabbed a healthy hank of black hair.

"Now it's my turn," Peggy panted.

"Let go of me, damn it."

"Move one fraction of an inch, and I'll yank your scalp off your head."

But Peggy had not calculated accurately. Suddenly she felt her own hair gripped—by Lilian's free fist.

For moments they stood, stalemated, each with a handful of hair, glaring at one another.

"You bitch," Lilian spat. "I'll have you yet. I did once. I will again."

She pulled. So did Peggy. Both girls writhed and wrestled, and in seconds were sprawled on the ground. Breasts bare, blond hair flying, Peggy leaped at Lilian.

Long legs tangled. Lovely bodies locked and labored as the two rolled on the ground—in dry leaves, hitting bramble bushes, stones. They clawed and scratched and bit. They kicked and punched. It took all of Peggy's strength to accomplish it, but she gradually achieved command, found herself sitting on top of Lilian.

There was a lull as both girls struggled for breath.

Then Lilian's hand, stretched above her head, found a flinty rock. She lifted it and swung. Peggy ducked successfully but lost her position. Lilian heaved up, overturning the younger girl, and once more they rolled together, arms and legs flailing.

A vine was Peggy's undoing. As the thorny creeper trapped her foot, Lilian seized the chance, pounced, and triumphantly sat firmly astride Peggy's prone body. Peggy, to free her foot, twisted over on her back, Lilian still in the saddle.

Again a lull as the combatants recovered breath.

Lilian then bent her head to nuzzle Peggy's exposed bosom. "I'm going to have you now. I'm going to have you—"

"The hell you will."

"Damn it!" She forced her free hand under Peggy's back. "Lift up," she snarled.

Peggy pressed her aching back closer to the ground.

Lilian punched her in the cheek, leaving a stinging red mark.

"Lift up, I said!" She jammed a knee into Peggy's ribs.

Peggy lifted. Lilian managed to work the green suit down to Peggy's calves.

Peggy stared at the girl astride her. The purple halter, ripped and filthy, hung from one shoulder. A large, dark nipple peeked over the edge. Blood oozed from scratches and a dozen bruises. Black hair tumbled over Lilian's smudged face. Her eyes burned with lust.

As Lilian's hot hand slipped lower, Peggy closed her eyes, clenched her teeth. She cried out as nails raked her. She felt herself being touched, violated. Summoning all her remaining strength for one last effort, she planned it carefully.

Then she sucked in a deep breath, dug a heel into the ground. The other foot she raised slowly . . . then her knee up . . . then down for added power . . . then up —smack! Right into Lilian's bottom. The blow sent her flying over Peggy's head to sprawl face down, squealing.

Peggy was on her feet almost before Lilian had landed. The girl lay on her belly, one side of her face in bare earth, her lipstick-smeared mouth wide open.

Peggy grabbed up a dead branch. She towered over the fallen girl, wielding the heavy wood as if it were a warrior's club.

Lilian was gasping for breath. Peggy's surprise attack had knocked all the wind out of her.

"Get up," Peggy ordered.

Lilian searched Peggy's face. "No more," she gasped. "You win, Peggy."

"Get up, damn it."

Lilian struggled to a sitting position.

Peggy flexed the club. She was longing for an excuse to knock Lilian's brains out. She reached down, grabbed her captive by the arm, digging her fingers into the lithe flesh. She forced the girl to the fallen trunk, stepped back to stand guard, feet planted solidly on the ground, the club raised threateningly.

"What are you going to do now?" Lilian asked tonelessly.

A wave of revulsion swam over Peggy as she watched the girl in front of her. Lilian's usually impeccable feet, now with sandals missing, were crusted with dirt, the nail polish chipped. The customarily sleek legs were scratched and dirty. The shoulders that never slouched now drooped; Lilian's arms hung limply from their sockets. Her fingernails were black and broken. Her Indian-straight spine seemed to have collapsed. The lips were a twisted red smudge. The face was bruised and scratched almost beyond recognition. The raven hair was a tangled mat. And all the fire in the eyes, Peggy realized, had died.

"You're the one responsible for Alice, aren't you?"

Lilian said woodenly, "What if I am?"

Peggy, sickened, said, "Why? Why did you do it? Are you actually demented?"

Lilian looked up. Then her gaze moved from Peggy, past Peggy, into her own dark world. She began to babble:

"Do you know what it's like to be hated by everybody around you? Hated and despised? It's hell! You live in a private hell, pretending people are only jealous or stupid, but deep down their hate and contempt hurts. And everybody, every person in this rotten place hated me—or was afraid of me. Every counselor, every kid, even Duncan." She glanced back at Peggy. "Even you. I could tell. That's

why I had to do what I did. I didn't want to, really, but you were afraid—you wouldn't let me near you. Beth stalled me by letting me have her in the bathhouse, but when you were drugged, I couldn't resist. I took you. I thought maybe when you woke up you would remember —and would want me, too."

Peggy had grown cold. She listened in horror as Lilian poured forth answers to unasked questions.

"Beth didn't hate me, at first. In fact, she liked me. She's a real les, the way I am. But I made her despise me, and later she was afraid of me just like all the rest." Lilian grinned, evil once more. "Sure, I had them all. Beth wouldn't tell because it would ruin Pam. And Pam kept her mouth shut because it would ruin Beth. Loyalty!" Lilian laughed chillingly. "Mike knew, too. She tried to protect you from me. But she couldn't say anything—because I'd had Pam once. A single word and I'd have spilled the beans. I had proof—a photo—"

Unexpectedly Lilian's savage expression turned warm.

"One person didn't hate me, though. She wasn't afraid of me, either. One lousy person in this whole mob. Alice."

Peggy's mind became stiletto-sharp. She listened intently.

"Alice thought I was the greatest," Lilian went on. "She had a crush on me. She wanted to be like me. She came to me often, to confide in me." Lilian looked up at Peggy. "That night, it was she who sought me out. She wanted to tell me about her boy friend back home. I thought of pimply brats pawing at her, trying to feel those cute breasts, getting their kicks . . . It made me sick! I decided then and there to teach her my way of sex."

"Oh, how could you!" shrieked Peggy.

Lilian's eyes were glassy.

"Peggy, believe me. I wasn't going to do anything. I didn't want to hurt her. I was going to tell her about things, and maybe just touch her, to feel how soft she was. I was only going to touch a breast. I wanted to kiss it—but I wouldn't have, if she didn't want me to." Tears came to Lilian's eyes. "But she got scared. She fought me and that made me angry. Suddenly she had become

like all others—afraid of me. I told her I wouldn't hurt her but she called me filthy names. She said she would report me!" Lilian wiped away tears with the back of her hand. "That's why I had to hit her. That's why I had to tell her that if she didn't keep her mouth shut, I would maim her for life." These last words had burst from Lilian in wild sobs. "Oh, God, why am I a lesbian!"

Peggy's heart was pounding. Strangely, she felt pity for the girl before her.

Lilian said in a calmer tone, "Beth and Pam—they thought that if they exposed me, I would have exposed them. It would have ruined the camp. And everyone would have been afraid of Beth as a nurse, would not have trusted Pam as a teacher." She looked away. "But I never would have said anything. I only wanted to scare them."

"Do you mean that, Lilian?"

"You may not believe me, but it's God's honest truth. You don't seem to realize, Peggy, that in my heart I love them all. I love every woman born!"

She had risen to her feet. She stared into Peggy's face.

"All right, Lilian," said Peggy, taking a firm grip on the club. "I think we'd better go now. We have a date with Miss Duncan."

Nodding, Lilian started walking up the path—a pathetic figure, and a sick one, Peggy thought. She was not normal. She was not even a normal lesbian, Peggy joked to herself, but the quip fell flat.

Walking uphill in Lilian's wake, she wondered what would happen now. Would everything come to the surface? She had every intention of bringing in Lilian to face Miss Duncan and Pam.

All right, so there might be a blow-up. But it had to be risked, no matter whose reputations were destroyed. Lesbianism at a girl's camp had to be stopped at any cost. She knew the full folly of it now. She was glad that she had proved to her own satisfaction that she was completely healthy. To Kirby's satisfaction, too, she thought wryly. It was one way to get yourself a man, she supposed.

Swim period was not yet over when the pair reached the staff cabin. From the other side of the hill rose the echo of children's voices as they swam and played in the water.

Neither girl spoke while Lilian sponged off the worst of the dirt, changed her clothes. Peggy did the same in her cabin. They walked silently down the hill, stopping at the foot of the lodge stairs.

Lilian halted on the first step.

"Peggy—"

"Yes."

"I'd like to go up alone."

Their eyes met.

"No one else will have to be involved," Lilian said. "I'll simply confess to molesting Alice."

"What do you think will happen?"

"Miss Duncan will dismiss me, and I'll go home. I don't think she'll call the authorities, or anything. She'd want to keep it quiet."

"Lilian—" Peggy wished there were something she could say or do.

Lilian turned. Peggy watched her drag herself up the stairs. Midway, Lilian paused, and Peggy saw the shoulders go back, the spine straighten, the raven-tressed head rise. Peggy had the feeling that Lilian would be able to face whatever might be coming to her.

Peggy turned away reluctantly, wondering if she could have been of help, somehow. But then, she thought, perhaps I already have. Who knows?

And who cares, she sang inwardly, hurrying.

Only one thing mattered at the moment.

She had to get a call through to Kirby.

THE END

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